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A MESSAGE IN SECRET

FANTASTIC

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Editorial

WE HAVE all the respect in the world for the eminent Dr. James A. Van Allen, the man who was in charge of America's space probe and satellite experiments that revealed the existence of the belts of intense radiation that surround the earth—belts that now bear the name of the "Van Allen zone."

We also have respect for scientific caution. But we cannot let pass without a comment Dr. Van Allen's cautionary comment, recently, on the possibilities of space travel at speeds approaching that of light.

Van Allen, in a report to a space research symposium, pointed out that while we estimate there is only one hydrogen atom per cubic centimeter of interstellar space, rocketships moving at high speeds would run into considerable debris. He calculated that a ship moving at 56,000 miles a second—roughly 30% the speed of light—would have its nose cone bombarded by nine billion protons and nine billion electrons per second. This, said Van Allen, would be the equivalent of a radiation level of 20,000,000 roentgens an hour. A dose of 1,000 roentgens an hour is lethal.

Shielding might help somewhat, he added. But the erosion of the exterior of the rocketship would be a difficult and well-nigh insuperable problem. Ergo, said Dr. Van Allen: at the speed of light, or near it, the tenuous particles in space would probably destroy a rocket and the men in it. Since we must travel at those speeds to each other stars or galaxies, his conclusion is obvious: We are imprisoned in our own solar system.

This may all be well and true. Our only point is that we have come so far, since fire and the wheel, that it seems foolhardy to doubt that man will not be able to do anything he wants to.

Except, perhaps, to live with himself.—NL



Bourtai fought alongside of Flandry in their attempt to escape

A MESSAGE IN SECRET

By POUL ANDERSON

ILLUSTRATED by VARGA

The Tower rose monstrously from the barren plain, a symbol for all Altai. And Flandry, caught in a web of cosmic intrigue, trapped between the henchmen of Yesukai and the reluctant Tebtengri, cleaved to the Tower at the moment of truth.



from the Kha Khan's sentries.

SEEN on approach, against crystal darkness and stars crowded into foreign constellations, Altai was beautiful. More than half the northern hemisphere, somewhat less in the south, was polar cap. Snowfields were tinged rosy by the sun Krasna; naked ice shimmered blue and cold green. The tropical belt, steppe and tundra, which covered the remainder, shaded from bronze to tarnished gold, here and there the quicksilver flash of a big lake. Altai was ringed like Saturn, a tawny hoop with subtle rainbow iridescence flung spinning around the equator, three ra-

dii out in space. And beyond were two copper-coin moons.

Captain Sir Dominic Flandry, field agent, Naval Intelligence Corps of the Terrestrial Empire, pulled his gaze reluctantly back to the spaceship's bridge. "I see where its name came from," he remarked. *Altai* meant *Golden* in the language of the planet's human colonists; or so the Betelgeusean trader who passed on his knowledge electronically to Flandry had insisted. "But Krasna is a misnomer for the sun. It isn't really red to the human eye. Not nearly as much as your star, for instance. More of an orange-yellow, I'd say."

The blue visage of Zalat, skipper of the battered merchant vessel, twisted into the grimace which was his race's equivalent of a shrug. He was moderately humanoid, though only half as tall as a man, stout, hairless, clad in a metal mesh tunic. "I zuppoze it was de, you zay, contrazt." He spoke Terrestrial Anglic with a thick accent, as if to show that the independence of the Betelgeusean System—buffer state between the hostile realms of Terra and Merseia—did not mean isolation from the mainstream of interstellar culture.

Flandry would rather have

practiced his Altaian, especially since Zalat's Anglic vocabulary was so small as to limit conversation to platitudes. But he deferred. As the sole passenger on this ship, of alien species at that, with correspondingly special requirements in diet, he depended on the captain's good will. Also, Betelgeuseans take him at face value. Officially, he was only being sent to re-establish contact between Altai and the rest of mankind. Officially, his mission was so minor that Terra didn't even give him a ship of his own, but left him to negotiate passage as best he might . . . So, let Zalat chatter.

"After all," continued the master, "Altai was firzt colonized more dan zeven hoondert Terra-years a-pazt: in de verry dawn, you say, of interztellar travel. Little was known about w'at to eggzpect. Krazna muzt have been deprezzingly cold and red, after Zol. Now-to-days, we have more aztronautical zophiztication."

Flandry looked to the blaze of space, stars and stars and stars. He thought that an estimated four million of them, included in that vague sphere called the Terrestrial Empire, was an insignificant portion of

this one spiral arm of this one commonplace galaxy. Even if you added the other empires, the sovereign suns like Betelgeuse, the reports of a few explorers who had gone extremely far in the old days, that part of the universe known to man was terrifyingly small, And it would always remain so.

"Just how often do you come here?" he asked, largely to drown out silence.

"About onze a Terra-year," answered Zalut. "However, dere is ot'er merchantz on dis route. I have de fur trade, but Altai alzo produzes gemz, mineralz, hides, variouz organic productz, even dried meatz, w'ich are in zome demand at home. Zo dere is usually a Betelgeusean zhip or two at Ulan Baligh."

"Will you be here long?"

"I hope not. It iz a tediouz plaze for a nonhuman. One pleasure houze for uz has been eztablizshed, but—" Zalut made another face. "Wid de dizturbanzes going on, fur trapping and caravans have been much hampered. Last time I had to wait a ztandard mont' for a full cargo. Diz time may be worze."

Oh-ho, thought Flandry. But he merely asked aloud: "Since the metals and machinery you bring in exchange are so valuable, I wonder why some Altai-

ans don't acquire spaceships of their own and start trading."

"Dey have not dat kind of zivilization," Zalut replied. "Remember, our people have been coming here for lezz dan a zentury. Before den Altai was izolated, onze de original zhipz had been worn out. Dere was never zo great an interezt among dem in re-eztablizhing galactic contact az would overcome de handicap of poverty in metalz w'ich would have made zpazezship building eggzpenzive for dem. By now, might-be, zome of de younger Altaian malez have zome wizh for zuch an enterprize. But lately de Kha Khan has forbidden any of his zubjectz from leaving de planet, eggzept zome truzted and verry cloze-mout' perzonal reprezentatives in de Betelgeusean Zyztem. Dis prohibition is might-be one reazon for de inzurrectionz."

"Yeh." Flandry gave the ice fields a hard look. "If it were my planet, I think I'd look around for an enemy to sell it to."

And still I'm going there, he thought. Talk about your unsung heroes—! Though I suppose, the more the Empire cracks and crumbles, the more frantically a few of us have

to scurry around patching it. Or else the Long Night could come in our own sacrosanct lifetimes.

And in this particular instance, his mind ran on, I have reason to believe that an enemy is trying to buy the planet.

Where the Zeya and the Talyma, broad shallow rivers winding southward over the steppes from polar snows, met at Ozero Rurik, the city named Ulan Baligh was long ago founded. It had never been large, and now, the only permanent human settlement on Altai, had perhaps 20,000 residents. But there was always a ring of encampments around it, tribesmen come to trade or confer or hold rites in the Prophet's Tower. Their tents and trunks walled the landward side of Ulan Baligh, spilled around the primitive spaceport, and raised campfire smoke for many kilometers along the indigo lakeshore.

As the spaceship descended, Captain Flandry was more interested in something less picturesque. Through a magnifying viewport in the after turret, to which he had bribed his way, he saw that monorail tracks encircled the city like spider strands; that unmistakable launchers for heavy mis-

siles squatted on them; that some highly efficient modern military aircraft lazed on grav repulsors in the sky; that barracks and emplacements for an armored brigade were under construction to the west, numerous tanks and beetle-cars already prowling on guard; that a squat building in the center of town must house a negagrav generator powerful enough to shield the entire urban area.

That all of this was new.

That none of it came from any factories controlled by Terra.

"But quite probably from our little green chums," he murmured to himself. "A Merseian base here, in the buffer region outflanking us at Catawrayannis . . . Well, it wouldn't be decisive in itself, but it would strengthen their hand quite a bit. And eventually, when their hand looks strong enough, they're going to fight."

He suppressed a tinge of bitterness at his own people, too rich to spend treasure in an open attack on the menace—most of them, even, denying that any menace existed, for what would dare break the Pax Terrestria? After all, he thought wryly, he enjoyed his furloughs Home precisely because Terra was decadent.

But for now, there was work at hand. Intelligence had collected hints in the Betelgeuse region: traders spoke of curious goings-on at some place named Altai; the archives mentioned a colony far off the regular space lanes, not so much lost as overlooked; inquiry produced little more than this, for Betelgeusean civilians like Zalut had no interest in Altaian affairs beyond the current price of angora pelts.

A proper investigation would have required some hundreds of men and several months. Being spread horribly thin over far too many stars, Intelligence was able to ship just one man to Betelgeuse. At the Terran Embassy, Flandry received a slim dossier, a stingy expense account, and orders to find what the devil was behind all this. After which, overworked men and machines forgot about him. They would remember when he reported back, or if he died in some spectacular fashion; otherwise, Altai might well lie obscure for another decade.

Which could be a trifle too long, Flandry thought.

He strolled with elaborate casualness from the turret to his cabin. It must not be suspected on Altai what he had already seen: or, if that infor-

mation leaked out, it must absolutely not be suspected that *he* suspected these new installations involved more than suppressing a local rebellion. The Khan had been careless about hiding the evidence, presumably not expecting a Terran investigator. He would certainly not be so careless as to let the investigator take significant information home again.

At his cabin, Flandry dressed with his usual care. According to report, the Altaians were people after his own heart: they liked color on their clothes, in great gobs. He chose a shimmerite blouse, green embroidered vest, purple trousers with gold stripe tucked into tooled-leather half boots, crimson sash and cloak, black beret slanted rakishly over his sleek seal-brown hair. He himself was a tall well-muscled man; his long face bore high cheekbones and straight nose, gray eyes, neat mustache. But then, he patronized Terra's best cosmetic biosculptor.

The spaceship landed at one end of the concrete field. Another Betelgeusean vessel towered opposite, confirming Zalut's claims about the trade. Not precisely brisk—maybe a score of ships per standard year—but continuous, and

doubtless by now important to the planet's economy.

As he stepped out the debarkation lock, Flandry felt the exhilaration of a gravity only three-fourths that of Home. But it was quickly lost when the air stung him. Ulan Baligh lay at eleven degrees north latitude. With an axial tilt about like Terra's, a wan dwarf sun, no oceans to moderate the climate, Altai knew seasons almost to the equator. The northern hemisphere was approaching winter. A wind streaking off the pole sheathed Flandry in chill, hooted around his ears and snatched the beret from his head.

He grabbed it back, swore, and confronted the portmaster with less dignity than he had planned. "Greeting," he said as instructed; "may peace dwell in your yurt. This person is named Dominic Flandry, and ranges Terra, the Empire."

The Altaian blinked narrow black eyes, but otherwise kept his face a mask. It was a wide, rather flat countenance, but not purely mongoloid: hook nose, thick close-cropped beard, light skin bespoke caucasoid admixture as much as the hybrid language. He was short, heavy-set, a wide-brimmed fur hat was tied in place,

his leather jacket was lacquered in an intricate design, his pants were of thick felt and his boots fleece-lined. An old-style machine pistol was holstered at his left side, a broad-bladed knife on the right.

"We have not had such visitors—" he paused, collected himself, and bowed. "Be welcome, all guests who come with honest words," he said ritually. "This person is named Pyotr Gutchluk, of the Kha Khan's sworn men." He turned to Zalut. "You and your crew may proceed directly to the yamen. We can handle the formalities later. I must personally conduct so distinguished a . . . a guest to the palace."

He clapped his hands. A couple of servants appeared, men of his own race, similarly dressed and similarly armed. Their eyes glittered, seldom leaving the Terran; the woodenness of their faces must cover an excitement which seethed. Flandry's luggage was loaded on a small electrotruck of antique design. Pyotr Gutchluk said, half inquiringly, "Of course so great an orluk as yourself would prefer a varyak to a tulyak."

"Of course," said Flandry, wishing his education had included those terms.

He discovered that a varyak was a native-made motorcycle.

At least, that was the closest Terran word. It was a massive thing on two wheels, smoothly powered from a bank of energy capacitors, a baggage rack aft and a machine-gun mount forward. It was steered with the knees, which touched a crossbar. Other controls were on a manual panel behind the windscreen. An outrigger wheel could be lowered for support when the vehicle was stationary or moving slowly. Pyotr Gutchluk offered goggled crash helmets from a saddlebag and took off at 200 kilometers an hour.

Flandry, accelerating his own varyak, felt the wind come around the screen, slash his face and nearly drag him from the saddle. He started to slow down. But—*Come now, old chap. Imperial prestige, stiff upper lip, and so on drearily.* Somehow he managed to stay on Gutchluk's tail as they roared into the city.

Ulan Baligh formed a crescent, where the waters of Ozero Rurik cut a bay into the flat shore. Overhead was a deep-blue sky, and the rings. Pale by day, they made a frosty halo above the orange sun. In such a light, the steeply upcurving red tile roofs took on the color of fresh blood. Even the ancient gray

stone walls beneath were tinged faint crimson. All the buildings were large, residences holding several families each, commercial ones jammed with tiny shops. The streets were wide, clean-swept, full of nomads and the wind. Gutchluk took an overhead road, suspended from pylons cast like dragons holding the cables in their teeth. It seemed an official passageway, nearly empty save for an occasional varyak patrol.

It also gave a clear view of the palace, standing in walled gardens: a giant version of the other houses, but gaudily painted and colonnaded with wooden dragons. The royal residence was, however, overshadowed by the Prophet's Tower. So was everything else.

Flandry understood from vague Betelgeusean descriptions that most of Altai professed a sort of Moslem-Buddhist synthesis, codified centuries ago by the Prophet Subotai. The religion had only this one temple, but that was enough. A sheer two kilometers it reared, up into the thin hurried air as if it would spear a moon. Basically a pagoda, blinding red, it had one blank wall facing north. No, not blank either, but a single flat tablet on which, in a contorted Sino-Cyrillic alphabet,

the words of the Prophet stood holy forever. Even Flandry, with scant reverence in his heart, knew a moment's awe. A stupendous will had raised that spire above these plains.

The elevated road swooped downward again. Gutchluk's varyak slammed to a halt outside the palace. Flandry, taller than any man of Altai, was having trouble with his steering bar. He almost crashed into the wrought-bronze gate. He untangled his legs and veered in bare time, a swerve that nearly threw him. Up on the wall, a guard leaned on his portable rocket launcher and laughed. Flandry heard him and swore. He continued the curve, steered a ring around Gutchluk so tight that it could easily have killed them both, slapped down the third wheel and let the cycle slow itself to a halt while he leaped from the saddle and took a bow.

"By the Ice People!" exclaimed Gutchluk. Sweat shone on his face. He wiped it off with a shaky hand. "They breed reckless men on Terra!"

"Oh, no," said Flandry, wishing he dared mop his own wet skin. "A bit demonstrative, perhaps, but never reckless."

Once again he had occasion

to thank loathed hours of calisthenics and judo practice for a responsive body. As the gates opened—Gutchluk had used his panel radio to call ahead—Flandry jumped back on his varyak and putt-putted through under the guard's awed gaze.

The garden was rocks, arched bridges, dwarf trees and mutant lichen. Little that was Terran would grow on Altai. Flandry began to feel the dryness of his own nose and throat. This air snatched moisture from him as greedily as it did heat. He was more grateful for the warmth inside the palace than he wished to admit.

A white-bearded man in fur-trimmed robe made a deep bow. "The Kha Khan himself bids you welcome, Orluk Flandry," he said. "He will see you at once."

"But the gifts I brought—"

"No matter now, my lord." The chamberlain bowed again, turned and let the way down arched corridors hung with tapestries. It was very silent: servants scurried about whispering, guards with modern blasters stood rigid in dragon-faced leather tunics and goggled helmets, tripods fumed bitter incense. The entire sprawling house seemed to crouch, watchful.

I imagine I have upset them somewhat, thought Flandry. Here they have some cozy little conspiracy—with beings sworn to lay all Terra waste, I suspect—and suddenly a Terran officer drops in, for the first time in five or six hundred years. Yes-s-s.

So what do they do next? It's their move.

Oleg Yesukai, Kha Khan of All the Tribes, was bigger than most Altaians, with a long sharp face and a stiff reddish beard. He wore gold rings, a robe thickly embroidered, silver trim on his fur cap, but all with an air of impatient concession to tedious custom. The hand which Flandry, kneeling, touched to his brow, was hard and muscular; the gun at the royal waist had seen use. This private audience chamber was curtained in red, its furniture inlaid and grotesquely carved; but it also held an ultramodern Betelgeusean graphone and a desk buried under official papers.

"Be seated," said the Khan. He himself took a low-legged chair and opened a carved bone cigar box. A smile of sorts bent his mouth. "Now that we've gotten rid of all my damned fool courtiers, we need no longer act as if you were a vassal." He took a

crooked purple stogie from the box. "I would offer you one of these, but it might make you ill. In thirty-odd generations, eating Altaian food, we have probably changed our metabolism a bit."

"Your majesty is most gracious." Flandry inhaled a cigaret of his own to lighting and relaxed as much as the straightbacked furniture permitted.

Oleg Khan spoke a stock-breeder's pungent obscenity. "Gracious? My father was an outlaw on the tundra at fifteen." (He meant local years, a third again as long as Terra's. Altai was about one A.U. distant from Krasna, but the sun was less massive than Sol.) "At thirty he had seized Ulan Baligh with 50,000 warriors and deposited old Tuli Khan naked on the arctic snows: so as not to shed royal blood, you understand. But he never would live here, and all his sons grew up in the ordu, the encampment, as he had done, practiced war against the Tebtengri as he had known war, and mastered reading, writing, and science to boot. Let us not bother with graciousness, Orluk Flandry, I never had time to learn any."

The Terran waited passive. It seemed to disconcert Oleg, who smoked for a minute in

short ferocious drags, then leaned forward and said, "Well, why does your government finally deign to notice us?"

"I had the impression, your majesty," said Flandry in a mild voice, "that the colonists of Altai came this far from Sol in order to escape notice."

"True. True. Don't believe that rat crud in the hero songs. Our ancestors came here because they were weak, not strong. Planets where men could settle at all were rare enough to make each one a prize, and there was little law in those days. By going far and picking a wretched icy desert, a few shiploads of Central Asians avoided having to fight for their home. Nor did they plan to become herdsmen. They tried to farm, but it proved impossible. Too cold and dry, among other things. They could not build an industrial, food-synthesizing society either: not enough heavy metals, fossil fuels, fissionables. This is a low-density planet, you know. Step by step, over generations, with only dim traditions to guide them, they were forced to evolve a nomadic life. And that was suited to Altai; that worked, and their numbers increased. Of course, legends have grown

up. Most of my people still believe Terra is some kind of lost utopia and our ancestors were hardy warriors." Oleg's rust-colored eyes narrowed upon Flandry. He stroked his beard. "I've read enough, thought enough, to have a fair idea of what your Empire is—and what it can do. So—why this visit, at this exact moment?"

"We are no longer interested in conquest for its own sake, your majesty," said Flandry. True, as far as it went. "And our merchants have avoided this sector for several reasons. It lies far from heartland stars; the Betelgeuseans, close to their own home, can compete on unequal terms; the risk of meeting some prowling warship of our Merseian enemies is unattractive. There has, in short, been no occasion, military or civilian, to search out Altai." He slipped smoothly into prevarication gear. "However, it is not the Emperor's wish that any members of the human family be cut off. At the very least, I bring you his brotherly greetings." (That was subversive. It should have been "fatherly." But Oleg Khan would not take kindly to being patronized.) "At most, if Altai wishes to rejoin us, for mutual protection and other bene-

fits, there are many possibilities which could be discussed. An Imperial resident, say, to offer help and advice—"

He let the proposal trail off, since in point of fact a resident's advice tended to be, "I suggest you do thus and so lest I call in the Marines."

The Altaian king surprised him by not getting huffy about sovereign status. Instead, amiable as a tiger, Oleg Yesukai answered: "If you are distressed about our internal difficulties, pray do not be. Nomadism necessarily means tribalism, which usually means feud and war. I already spoke of my father's clan seizing planetary leadership from the Nuru Bator. We in turn have rebellious gur-khans. As you will hear in court, that alliance called the Tebtengri Shamanate is giving us trouble. But such is nothing new in Altaian history. Indeed, I have a firmer hold over more of the planet than any Kha Khan since the Prophet's day. In a little while more I shall bring every last clan to heel."

"With the help of imported armament?" Flandry elevated his brows a millimeter. Risky though it was to admit having seen the evidence, it might be still more suspicious not to. And indeed the other man

seemed unruffled. Flandry continued, "The Imperium would gladly send a technical mission."

"I do not doubt it." Oleg's response was dry.

"May I respectfully ask what planet supplies the assistance your majesty is now receiving?"

"Your question is impertinent, as well you know. I do not take offense, but I decline to answer." Confidentially: "The old mercantile treaties with Betelgeuse guarantee monopolies in certain exports to their traders. This other race is taking payment in the same articles. I am not bound by oaths sworn by the Nuru Bator dynasty, but at present it would be inexpedient that Betelgeuse discover the facts."

It was a good spur-of-the-moment lie: so good that Flandry hoped Oleg would believe he had fallen for it. He assumed a fatuous Look-Mom-I'm-a-man-of-the-world smirk. "I understand, great Khan. You may rely on Terrestrial discretion."

"I hope so," said Oleg humorously. "Our traditional punishment for spies involves a method to keep them alive for days after they have been fayed."

Flandry's gulp was calculated, but not altogether faked.

"It is best to remind your majesty," he said, "just in case some of your less well-educated citizens should act impulsively, that the Imperial Navy is under standing orders to redress any wrong suffered by any Terran national anywhere in the universe."

"Very rightly," said Oleg. His tone made clear his knowledge that that famous rule had become a dead letter, except as an occasional excuse for bombarding some obstreperous world unable to fight back. Between the traders, his own study missions sent to Betelgeuse, and whoever was arming him—the Kha Khan had become as unmercifully well-informed about galactic politics as any Terran aristocrat.

Or Merseian. The realization was chilling. Flandry had perforce gone blind into his assignment. Only now, piece by piece, did he see how big and dangerous it was.

"A sound policy," continued Oleg. "But let us be perfectly frank, Orluk. If you should suffer, let us say, accidental harm in my dominions—and if your masters should misinterpret the circumstances, though of course they would not—I should be forced to invoke assistance which is quite readily available."

Merseia isn't far, thought

Flandry, and Intelligence knows they've massed naval units at their closest base. If I want to hoist Terran vintages again, I'd better start acting the fool as never before in a gloriously misspent life."

Aloud, a hint of bluster: "Betelgeuse has treaties with the Imperium, your majesty. They would not interfere in a purely interhuman dispute!" And then, as if appalled at himself: "But surely there won't be any. The, uh, conversation has, uh, taken an undesirable turn. Most unfortunate, your majesty! I was, ah, am interested in, er, unusual human colonies, and it was suggested to me by an archivist that—"

And so on and so on.

Oleg Yesukai grinned.

Altai rotated once in 35 hours. The settlers had adapted, and Flandry was used to postponing sleep. He spent the afternoon being guided around Ulan Baligh, asking silly questions which he felt sure his guides would relay to the Khan. The practice of four or five meals during the long day—his were offered in the town houses of chieftains belonging to Clan Yesukai—gave him a chance to build up the role of a young Terran fop who had wangled this assignment from

an uninterested Imperium, simply for a lark. A visit to one of the joyhouses, operated for transient nomads, helped reinforce the impression. Also, it was fun.

Emerging after sunset, he saw the Prophet's Tower turned luminous, so that it stood like a bloody lance over brawling, flicker-lit streets. The tablet wall was white, the words thereon in jet: two kilometers of precepts for a stern and bitter way of life. "I say," he exclaimed, "we haven't toured that yet. Let's go."

The chief guide, a burly gray warrior leathered by decades of wind and frost, looked uneasy. "We must hasten back to the palace, Orluk," he said. "A banquet is being prepared."

"Oh, fine. Fine! Though I I don't know how much of an orgy I'm in any shape for after this bout. Eh, what?" Flandry nudged the man's ribs with an indecent thumb. "Still, a peek inside, really I must. It's unbelievable, that skyscraper, don't you know."

"We must first cleanse ourselves."

A young man added bluntly: "In no case could it be allowed. You are not an initiate, and there is no holier spot in all the stars."

"Oh, well, in that case—

Mind if I photograph it tomorrow?"

"Yes," said the young man. "It is not forbidden, perhaps, but we could not be responsible for what the ordinary tribesman who saw you with your camera might do. None but the Tebtengri would look on the Tower with anything but reverent eyes."

"Teb—"

"Rebels and heathen, up in the north." The older man touched brow and lips, a sign against evil. "Magic-workers at Tengri Nor, traffickers with the Ice People. It is not well to speak of them, only to exterminate them. Now we must hasten, Orluk."

"Oh, yes. Yes. To be sure. Yes, indeed." Flandry scrambled into the tulyak, an open motor carriage with a dragon figurehead.

As he was driven to the palace, he weighed what he knew in an uncomfortable balance. Something was going on, much bigger than a local war. Oleg Khan had no intention Terra should hear about it. A Terran agent who actually learned a bit of truth would not go home alive; only a well-born idiot could safely be allowed return passage. Whether or not Flandry could convince the Altaians he was that idiot, re-

mained to be seen. It wouldn't be easy, for certainly he must probe deeper.

Furthermore, my lad, if somehow you do manage to swirl your cloak, twiddle your mustache, and gallop off to call an Imperial task force, Oleg may summon his friends. They are obviously not a private gun-selling concern, as he wants me to think; all Altai couldn't produce enough trade goods to pay for that stuff. So, if the friends get here first and decide to protect this military investment of theirs, there's going to be a fight. And with them dug in on the surface, as well as cruising local space, they'll have all the advantages. The Navy won't thank you, lad, if you drag them into a losing campaign.

He kindled a fresh cigaret and wondered miserably why he hadn't told HQ he was down with Twonk's Disease.

The valet assigned to him, at his guest suite in the palace, was a little puzzled by Terran garments. Flandry spent half an hour choosing his own ensemble. At last, much soothed, he followed an honor guard, who carried bared daggers in their hands, to the banquet hall, where he was placed at the Khan's right.

There was no table. A great

stone trough stretched the length of the hall, a hundred men sitting cross-legged on either side. Broth, reminiscent of won-ton soup but with a sharp taste, was poured into it from wheeled kettles. When next the Khan signalled, the soup was drained through traps, spigots flushed the trough clean, and even less identifiable solid dishes were shoveled in. Meanwhile cups of hot, powerfully alcoholic herb tea were kept filled, a small orchestra caterwauled on pipes and drums, and there were some fairly spectacular performances by varyak riders, knife dancers, acrobats, and marksmen. At the meal's end, an old tribal bard stood up and chanted lays; a plump and merry little man was summoned from the bazaars downtown to tell his original stories; gifts from the Khan were given every man present; and the affair broke up. Not a word of conversation had been spoken.

Oh, well, I'm sure everyone else had a hilarious time, Flandry grumbled to himself.

Not quite sober, he followed his guards back to his apartment. The valet bade him goodnight and closed the thick fur drapes which served for internal doors.

There was a radiant globe

illuminating the room, but it seemed feeble next to the light filling a glazed balcony window. Flandry opened this and looked out in wonder.

Beneath him lay the darkened city. Past twinkling red campfires, Ozero Rurik stretched in blackness and multiple moon-shivers, out to an unseen horizon. On his left the Prophet's Tower leaped up, a perpetual flame crowned with unwinking winter-brilliant stars. Both moons were near the full, ruddy discs six and eight times as broad to the eye as Luna, haloed by ice crystals. Their light drenched the plains, turned the Zeya and Talyma into ribbons of mercury. But the rings dominated all else, bridging the southern sky with pale rainbows. Second by second, thin firestreaks crossed heaven up there, as meteoric particles from that huge double band hurtled into the atmosphere.

Flandry was not much for gaping at landscapes. But this time it took minutes for him to realize how frigid the air was.

He turned back to the comparative warmth of his suite. As he closed the window, a woman entered from the bedroom.

Flandry had expected some such hospitality. He saw that

she was taller than most Altaians, with long blue-black hair and lustrous tilted eyes of a greenish hue rare on this planet. Otherwise a veil and a gold-stiffened cloak hid her. She advanced quickly, till she was very near him, and he waited for some token of submission.

Instead, she stood watching him for close to a minute. It grew so still in the room that he heard the wind on the lake. Shadows were thick in the corners, and the dragons and warriors on the tapestries appeared to stir.

Finally, in a low uneven voice, she said: "Orluk, are you indeed a spy from the Mother of Men?"

"Spy?" Flandry thought, horrified about *agents provocateurs*. "Good cosmos, no! I mean, that is to say, nothing of the sort!"

She laid a hand on his wrist. The fingers were cold, and clasped him with frantic strength. Her other hand slipped the veil aside. He looked upon a broad fair-skinned face, delicately arched nose, full mouth and firm chin: handsome rather than pretty. She whispered, so fast and fiercely he had trouble following:

"Whatever you are, you

must listen! If you are no warrior, then give the word when you go home to those who are. I am Bourtai Ivanskaya of the Tumurji folk, who belonged to the Tebtengri Shamanate. Surely you have heard speak of them, enemies of Oleg, driven into the north but still at war with him. My father was a noyon, a division commander, well known to Juchi Ilyak. He fell at the battle of Rivers Meet, last year, where the Yesukai men took our whole ordu. I was brought here alive, partly as a hostage—"A flare of haughtiness: "As if that could influence my people!—and partly for the Kha Khan's harem. Since then I have gained a little of his confidence. More important, I have my own connections now, the harem is always a center of intrigue, nothing is secret from it for very long, but much which is secret begins there—"

"I know," said Flandry. He was stunned, almost overwhelmed, but could not help adding: "Bedfellows make strange politics."

She blinked incomprehension and plunged on: "I heard today that a Terran envoy was landed. I thought perhaps, perhaps he was come, knowing a little of what Oleg Yesukai readies against the Mother of

Men. Or if he does not, he must be told! I found what woman would be lent him, and arranged the substitution of myself. Ask me not how! I have wormed secrets which give me power over more than one harem guard—it is not enough to load them with antisex hormone on such a tour of duty! I had the right. Oleg Khan is my enemy and the enemy of my dead father, all means of revenge are lawful to me. But more, worse, Holy Terra lies in danger. Listen, Terra man—"

Flandry awoke. For those few seconds, it had been so fantastic he couldn't react. Like a bad stereodrama, the most ludicrous clichés, he was confronted with a girl (it would be a girl, too, and not simply a disgruntled man!) who babbled her autobiography as prologue to some improbable revelation. Now suddenly he understood that this was real: that melodrama does happen once in a while. And if he got caught playing the hero, any role except comic relief, he was dead.

He drew himself up, fended Bourtai off, and said in haste: "My dear young lady, I have not the slightest competence in these matters. Furthermore, I've heard far more plausible

stories from far too many colonial girls hoping for a free ride to Terra. Which, I assure you, is actually not a nice place at all for a little colonial girl without funds. I do not wish to offend local pride, but the idea that a single backward planet could offer any threat to the Imperium would be funny if it were not so yawnworthy. I beg you, spare me."

Bourtai stepped back. The cloak fell open. She wore a translucent gown which revealed a figure somewhat stocky for Terran taste but nonetheless full and supple. He would have enjoyed watching that, except for the uncomprehending pain on her face.

"But my lord, Orluk," she stammered, "I swear to you by the Mother of us both—"

You poor romantic, it cried in him, what do you think I am, a god? If you're such a yokel you never heard of planting microphones in a guest room, Oleg Khan is not. Shut up before you kill us both!

Aloud, he got out a delighted guffaw. "Well, by Sirius, I do call this thoughtful. Furnishing me with a beautiful spy atop everything else! But honestly, darling, you can drop the pretense now. Let's play some more adult games, eh, what?"

He reached out for her. She

writhed free, ran across the room, dodged his pursuit and almost shouted through swift tears: "No, you fool, you blind brainless cackler, you will listen! You will listen if I must knock you to the floor and tie you up—and tell them, tell when you come home, ask them only to send a real spy and learn for themselves!"

Flandry cornered her. He grabbed both flailing wrists and tried to stop her mouth with a kiss. She brought her forehead hard against his nose. He staggered back, half blind with the pain, and heard her yelling: "It is the Merseians, great green-skinned monsters with long tails, the Merseians, I tell you, who come in secret from a secret landing field. I have seen them myself, walking these halls after dark, I have heard from a girl to whom a drunken orkhon babbled, I have crept like a rat in the walls and listened myself. They are called Merseians, the most terrible enemy your race and mine have yet known, and—"

Flandry sat down on a couch, wiped blood off his mustache, and said weakly: "Never mind that for now. How do we get out of here? Before the guards come to shoot us down, I mean."

Bourtai fell silent, and he realized he had spoken in Anglic. He realized further that they wouldn't be shot, except to prevent escape. They would be questioned, gruesomely.

He didn't know if there were lenses as well as microphones in the walls. Nor did he know if the bugs passed information on to some watchful human, or only recorded data for study in the morning. He dared assume nothing but the former.

Springing to his feet, he reached Bourtai in one bound. She reacted with feline speed. A hand, edge on, cracked toward his larynx. He had already dropped his head, and took the blow on the hard top of his skull. His own hands gripped the borders of her cloak and crossed forearms at her throat. Before she could jab him in the solar plexus, he yanked her too close to him. She reached up thumbs, to scoop out his eyeballs. He rolled his head and was merely scratched on the nose. After the last buffet, that hurt. He yipped, but didn't let go. A second later, she went limp in his strangle.

He whirled her around, got an arm lock, and let her sag against him. She stirred. So

brief an oxygen starvation had brought no more than a moment's unconsciousness. He buried his face in her dark flowing hair, as if he were a lover. It had a warm, somehow summery smell. He found an ear and breathed softly:

"You little gristlehead, did it ever occur to you that the Khan is suspicious of me? That there must be listeners? Now our forlorn chance is to get out of here. Steal a Betelgeusean spaceship, maybe. First, though, I must pretend I am arresting you, so they won't come here with too much haste and alertness for us. Understand? Can you play the part?"

She grew rigid. He felt her almost invisible nod. The hard young body leaning on him eased into a smoothness of controlled nerve and muscle. He had seldom known a woman this competent in a physical emergency. Unquestionably, Bourtai Ivanskaya had military training.

She was going to need it.

Aloud, Flandry huffed: "Well, I've certainly never heard anything more ridiculous! There aren't any Merseians around here. I checked very carefully before setting out. Wouldn't want to come across them, don't you know, and spend maybe a year in

some dreary Merseian jail while the pater negotiated my release. Eh, what? Really now, it's perfect rot, every word." He hemmed and hawed a bit. "I think I'd better turn you in, madam. Come along, now, no tricks!"

He marched her out the door, into a pillared corridor. One end opened on a window, twenty meters above a night-frozen fishpond. The other stretched into dusk, lit by infrequent bracketed lamps. Flandry hustled Bourtai down that side. Presently they came to a downward-sweeping staircase. A pair of sentries, in helmets, leather jackets, guns and knives, stood posted there. One of them aimed and barked: "Halt! What would you?"

"This girl, don't you know," panted Flandry. He nudged Bourtai, who gave some realistic squirmings. "Started to babble all sorts of wild nonsense. Who's in charge here? She thought I'd help her against the Kha Khan. Imagine!"

"What?" A guardsman trod close.

"The Tebtengri will avenge me!" snarled Bourtai. "The Ice People will house in the ruin of this palace!"

Flandry thought she was overacting, but the guards both looked shocked. The near-

er one sheathed his blaster. "I shall hold her, Orluk," he said. "Boris, run for the commander."

As he stepped close, Flandry let the girl go. With steel on his pate and stiff leather on his torso, the sentry wasn't very vulnerable. Except—Flandry's right hand rocketed upward. The heel of it struck the guard under the nose. He lurched backward, caromed off the balustrade, and flopped dead on the stairs. The other, half-turned to go, spun about on one booted heel. He snatched for his weapon. Bourtai put a leg behind his ankles and pushed. Down he went. Flandry pounced. They rolled over, clawing for a grip. The guard yelped. Flandry saw Bourtai over his opponent's shoulder. She had taken the belt off the first warrior and circled about with the leather in her hands. Flandry let his enemy get on top. Bourtai put the belt around the man's neck, a knee between his shoulder-blades, and heaved.

Flandry scrambled from below. "Get their blasters," he gasped. "Here, give me one. Quick! We've made more racket than I hoped. Do you know the best way to escape? Lead on, then!"

Bourtai raced barefooted

down the steps. Her goldcloth cloak and frail gown streamed behind her, insanely unfitting for the occasion. Flandry came behind, one flight, two flights.

Boots clattered on marble. Rounding yet another spiral curve, Flandry met a squad of soldiers quick-stepping upward. The leader hailed him: "Do you have the evil woman, Orluk?"

So there had been a continuous listener. Of course, even surrendering Bourtai, Flandry could not save his own skin. Harmless fop or no, he had heard too much.

The squad's eyes registered the girl's blaster even as their chief spoke. Someone yelled. Bourtai fired into the thick of them. Ionic lightning crashed. Flandry dropped. A bolt sizzled where he had been. He fired, wide-beam, the energy too diluted to kill even at this range but scorching four men at once. As their screams lifted, he bounced back to his feet, overleaped the fallen front line, stiff-armed a warrior beyond, and hit the landing.

From here, a bannister curled grandly to the ground floor. Flandry whooped, seated himself, and slid. At the bottom was a sort of lobby, with glass doors opening on the garden. The moons and rings

were so bright that no headlights shone from the half-dozen varyaks roaring toward this entrance. Mounted guardsmen, attracted by the noise of the fight—Flandry stared around. Arched windows flanked the doors, two meters up. He gestured to Bourtai, crouched beneath one and made a stirrup of his hands. She nodded, soared to the sill, broke glass with her gun butt, and fired into the troop. Flandry took shelter behind a column and blasted loose at the remnant of the infantry squad, stumbling down the stairs in pursuit. Their position hopelessly exposed to him, they retreated from sight.

A varyak leaped through the doors. The arms of the soldier aboard it shielded his face against flying glass. Flandry shot before the man had uncovered himself. The varyak, sensitively controlled, veered and went down across the doorway. The next one hurtled over it. The rider balanced himself with a trained body, blazing away at the Terran. Bourtai dropped him from above.

She sprang down unassisted. "I got two more outside," she said. "Another pair are lurking, calling for help—"

"We'll have to chance them. Where are the nearest gates?"

"They will be closed! We cannot burn through the lock before—"

"I'll find a means. Quick, up on this saddle. Slowly, now, out the door behind me. Right the putt-putts of those two men you killed and stand by." Flandry had already dragged a corpse from one varyak (not without an instant's compassionate wondering what the man had been like alive) and set the machine back on its wheels. He sprang to the seat and went full speed out the shattered door.

So far, energy weapons had fulfilled their traditional military function, giving more value to purposeful speed of action than mere numbers. But there was a limit: two people couldn't stave off hundreds for very long. He had to get clear.

Flame sought him. He lacked skill to evade such fire by tricky riding. Instead, he plunged straight down the path, crouched low and hoping he wouldn't be pierced. A bolt burned one leg, slightly but with savage pain. He reached the gloomy, high-arched bridge he wanted. His cycle snorted up and over. Just beyond the hump, he dropped off, relaxing muscles and cushioning himself with an arm in judoka style. Even so, he bumped his nose. For a mo-

ment, tears blinded him, and he used bad words. Then the two enemy varyaks followed each other across the bridge. He sprang up on the railing, unseen, and shot both men as they went by.

Vaguely, he heard an uproar elsewhere. One by one, the palace windows lit, until scores of dragon eyes glared into night. Flandry slid down the bridge, disentangled the heaped varyaks, and hailed Bourtai. "Bring the other machines!" She came, riding one and leading two more by tethers to the guide bars. He had felt reasonably sure that would be standard equipment; if these things were commonly used by nomads, there'd be times when a string of pack vehicles was required.

"We take two," he muttered. Here, beneath an overleaning rock, there were a pair of shadows. Moonlight beyond made the garden one fog of coppery light. The outer wall cut that off, brutally black, with merlons raised against Altai's rings like teeth. "The rest, we use to ram down the gates. Can do?"

"Must do!" she said, and set the varyak control panels. "Here. Extra helmets and clothing are always kept in the saddlebags. Put on the helmet,

at least. The clothes we can don later."

"We won't need them for a short dash—"

"Do you think the spaceport is not now a-crawl with Yesukai men?"

"Oh, hell," said Flandry.

He buckled on the headgear, snapped down the goggles, and mounted anew. Bourtai ran along the varyak line, flipping main switches. The riderless machines took off. Gravel spurted from their wheels, into Flandry's abused face. He followed the girl.

A pair of warriors raced down a cross path, briefly stark under the moons and then eaten again by murk. They had not seen their quarry. The household troops must be in one classic confusion, Flandry thought. He had to escape before hysteria faded and systematic hunting was organized.

The palace gates loomed before him, heavy bars screening off a plaza that was death-white in the moon radiance. Flandry saw his varyaks only as meteoric gleams. Sentries atop the wall had a better view. Blasters thundered, machine guns raved, but there were no riders to drop from those saddles.

The first varyak hit with a

doomsday clangor. It rebounded in four pieces. Flandry sensed a chunk of red-hot metal buzz past his ear. The next one crashed, and the bars buckled. The third smote and collapsed across a narrow opening. The fourth flung the gates wide. "*Now!*"

At 200 KPH, Bourtai and Flandry made for the gateway. They had a few seconds without fire from the demoralized men above them. Bourtai hit the toppled machines. Her own climbed that pile, took off, and soared halfway across the plaza. Flandry saw her balance herself, precise as a bird, land on two wheels and vanish in an alley beyond the square. Then it was his turn. He wondered fleetingly what the chances of surviving a broken neck were, and hoped he would not. Not with the Khan's interrogation chambers waiting. Whoops, bang, here we go! He knew he couldn't match Bourtai's performance. He slammed down the third wheel in midair. He hit ground with less violence than expected: first-class shock absorbers on this cycle. An instant he teetered, almost rolling over. He came down on his outrigger. Fire spattered off stone behind him. He retracted the extra wheel and gunned his motor.

A glance north, past the

Tower toward the spaceport, showed him grav-beam airboats aloft, a hornet swarm. He had no prayer of hijacking a Betelgeusean ship. Nor was it any use to flee to Zalut in the yamen. Where, then, beneath these unmerciful autumnal stars?

Bourtai was a glimpse in moonlight, half a kilometer ahead of him down a narrow nighted street. He let her take the lead, concentrated grimly on avoiding accidents. It seemed like an eyeblink, and it seemed like forever, before they were out of the city and onto the open steppe.

Wind lulled in long grasses, the whispering ran for kilometers, on and on beyond the world's edge, pale yellow-green in a thousand subtle hues rippled by the wind's footsteps. Here and there the spiky red of some frost-nipped bush thrust up; the grasses swirled about it like a sea. High and high overhead, incredibly high, an infinite vault full of wind and deep-blue chill, the sky reached. Krasna burned low in the west, dull orange, painting the steppe with ruddy light and fugitive shadows. The rings were an ice bridge to the south; northward the sky had a bleak greenish shimmer which Bour-

tai said was reflection off an early snowfall.

Flandry crouched in grasses as tall as himself. When he ventured a peek, he saw the airboat that hunted him. It spiraled lazy, but the mathematics guiding it and its cohorts wove a net around this planet. To his eyes, even through binoculars taken from a saddlebag, the boat was so far as to be a mere metallic flash; but he knew it probed for him with telescopes, ferrous detectors, infrared amplifiers.

He would not have believed he could escape the Khan's hundreds of searching craft this long. Two Altaian days, was it? Memory had faded. He knew only a fever dream of bounding north on furious wheels, his skin dried and bleeding from the air; sleeping a few seconds at a time, in the saddle, eating jerked meat from the varyak supplies as he rode, stopping to refill canteens at a waterhole Bourtai had found by signs invisible to him. He knew only how he ached, to the nucleus of his inmost cell, and how his brain was gritty from weariness.

But the plain was unbelievably huge, almost twice the land area of all Terra. The grass was often as high as this, veiling prey from sky-

borne eyes. They had driven through several big herds, to break their trail; they had dodged and woven under Bourtai's guidance, and she had a hunter's knowledge of how to confuse pursuit.

Now, though, the chase seemed near its end.

Flandry glanced at the girl. She sat cross-legged, impassive, showing her own exhaustion just by the darkening under her eyes. In stolen leather clothes, hair braided under the crash helmet, she might have been a boy. But the grease smeared on her face for protection had not much affected its haughty good looks. The man hefted his gun. "Think he'll spot us?" he asked. He didn't speak low, but the blowing immensities around reduced all voices to nothing.

"Not yet," she answered. "He is at the extreme detector range, and cannot swoop down at every dubious flicker of instrument readings."

"So . . . ignore him and he'll go away?"

"I fear not." She grew troubled. "They are no fools, the Khan's troopers. I know that search pattern. He and his fellows will circle about, patrolling much the same territory until nightfall. Then, as you

know, if we try to ride further, we must turn on the heaters of our varyaks or freeze to death. And that will make us a flame to the infrared spotters."

Flandry rubbed his smooth chin. Altaian garments were ridiculously short on him, so thank all elegant gods for anti-beard enzyme! He wished he dared smoke. "What can we do?" he said.

She shrugged. "Stay here. There are well-insulated sleeping bags, which ought to keep us alive if we share a single one. But if the local temperature drops far enough below zero, our own breath and body radiation may betray us."

"How close are we to your friends?"

Bourtai rubbed tired hazel eyes. "I cannot say. They move about, under the Khrebet and along the Kara Gobi fringe. At this time of year they will be drifting southward, so we are not so terribly far from one or another ordu, I suppose. Still, distances are never small on the steppe." After a moment: "If we live the night, we can still not drive to find them. The varyaks' energy cells are exhausted. We shall have to walk."

Flandry glanced at the vehicles, now battered and dusty beyond recognition. Wonder-

fully durable gadgets, he thought in a vague way. Largely handmade, of course, using small power tools and the care possible in a nonmercantile economy. The radios, though, were short range . . . No use getting wistful. The first call for Tebtengri help would bring that aircraft overhead down like a swooping falcon.

He eased himself to his back and let his muscles throb. The ground was cold under him. After a moment, Bourtai followed suit, snuggling close in somehow childlike trustfulness.

"If we do not escape, well, such is the space-time pattern," she said, more calmly than he could have managed. "But if we do, what then is your plan, Orluk?"

"Get word to Terra, I suppose. Don't ask me how."

"Will not your friends come avenging when you fail to return?"

"No. The Khan need only tell the Betelgeuseans that I, regrettably died in some accident or riot or whatever, and will be cremated with full honors. It would not be difficult to fake: a blaster-charred corpse about my size, perhaps, for one human looks much like another to the untrained non-

human. Word will reach my organization, and naturally some will suspect, but they have so much else to do that the suspicion will not appear strong enough to act on. The most they will do is send another agent like myself. And this time, expecting him, the Khan can fool him: camouflage the new installations, make sure our man talks only to the right people and sees only the right things. What can one man do against a planet?"

"You have done somewhat already."

"But I told you, I caught Oleg by surprise."

"You will do more," she continued serenely. "Can you not, for instance, smuggle a letter out through some Betelgeusean? We can get agents into Ulan Baligh."

"I imagine the same thought has occurred to the Khan. He will make sure no one he is not certain of has any contact with any Betelegeusean, and will search all export material with care."

"Write a letter in the Ter-ran language."

"He can read that himself, if no one else."

"Oh, no." Bourtai raised herself on one elbow. "There is not a human on all Altai except yourself who reads the

—what do you call it? —the Anglic. Some Betelgeuseans do, of course, but no Altaian has ever learned; there seemed no pressing reason. Oleg himself reads only Altaian and the principal Betelgeusean language. I know; he mentioned it to me one night recently." She spoke quite coolly of her past year. Flandry gathered that in this culture it was no disgrace to have been a harem slave: fortunes of war.

"Even worse," he said. "I can just see Oleg's agents permitting a document in an unknown alphabet to get out. In fact, from now until whenever they have me dead, I doubt if they will let anything they are not absolutely sure about come near a spaceship, or a spacefarer."

Bourtai sat up straight. Sudden, startling tears blurred her gaze. "But you cannot be helpless!" she cried. "You are from *Terra*!"

He didn't want to disillusion her. "We'll see." Hastily, plucking a stalk of grass and chewing it: "This tastes almost like home. Remarkable similarity."

"Oh, but it is of Terran origin." Bourtai's dismay changed mercurially to simple astonishment, that he should not know what was so everyday to her. "The first colonists

here found the steppe a virtual desert—only sparse plant forms, poisonous to man. All other native life had retreated into the Arctic and Antarctic. Our ancestors mutated what seeds and small animals they had along, created suitable strains, and released them. Terrestroid ecology soon took over the whole unfrozen belt."

Flandry noticed once more that Bourtai's nomadic life had not made her a simple barbarian. Hm, it would be most interesting to see what a true civilization on wheels was like . . . if he survived, which was dubious . . . He was too tired to concentrate. His thoughts drifted off along a pattern of fact and deduction, mostly things he knew already.

Krasna was obviously an old sun, middle Population Two, drifted from the galactic nucleus into this spiral arm. As such, it—and its planets—were poor in the heavier elements, which are formed within the stars, scattered by novae and supernovae, and accumulated in the next stellar generation. Being smaller than Sol, Krasna had matured slowly, a red dwarf through most of its long existence.

Initially, for the first billion years or so, internal heat had made Altai more or less Ter-

restroid in temperature. Protoplasmic life had evolved in shallow seas, and probably the first crude land forms. But when moltenness and most radioactivity were used up, only the dull sun furnished heat. Altai froze. It happened slowly enough for life to adapt during the long period of change.

And then, while who knew how many megacenturies passed, Altai was ice-bound from pole to pole. An old, old world, so old that one moon had finally spiraled close and shattered to make the rings: so old, indeed, that its sun had completed the first stage of hydrogen burning and moved into the next. From now on, for the next several million years, Krasna would get hotter and brighter. At last Altai's seas, liquid again, would boil; beyond that, the planet itself would boil, as Krasna became nova; and beyond that the star would be a white dwarf, sinking toward ultimate darkness.

But as yet the process was only begun. Only the tropics had reached a temperature men could endure. Most of the water fled thence and snowed down on the still frigid polar quarters, leaving dry plains where a few plants struggled to re-adapt . . . and were de-

stroyed by this invading green grass . . .

Flandry's mind touched the remote future of his own planet, and recoiled. A gelid breeze slid around him. He grew aware how stiff and chilly he was. And the sun not even set!

He groaned back to a sitting position. Bourtai sat calm in her fatalism. Flandry envied her. But it was not in him, to accept the chance of freezing—to walk, if he survived this night, over hundreds of parched kilometers, through cold strengthening hour by autumn hour.

His mind scuttered about, a trapped weasel seeking any bolthole. Fire, fire, my chance of immortality for a fire—*Hoy, there!*

He sprang to his feet, remembered the aircraft, and hit dirt again so fast that he bumped his bruised nose. The girl listened wide-eyed to his streaming, sputtering Anglic. When he had finished, she sketched a reverent sign. "I too pray the Spirit of the Mother that She guide us," said Bourtai.

Flandry skinned his teeth in a grin. "I, uh, wasn't precisely praying, my dear. No, I think I've a plan. Wild, but—now, listen—"

Arghun Tiliksky thrust his

face out of that shadow which blurred the ring of cross-legged men, into the scant sunlight trickling through a small window of the Kibitka. "It was evil," he declared sharply. "Nothing is more dreaded than a grass fire. And you set one! No luck can come from such a deed."

Flandry studied him. The noyon of the Mangu Tuman was quite young, even for these times when few men of Tebtengri reached great age; and a dashing, gallant warrior, as everyone said and as he had proved in the rescue. But to some extent, Arghun was the local equivalent of a prude.

"The fire was soon put out, wasn't it?" asked the Terran mildly. "I heard from your scout, the Kha Khan's aircraft swarmed there and tossed foam bombs down till the flames were smothered. Not many hectares were burned over."

"In such tasks," said Toghrul Vavilov, Gur-Khan of the tribe, "all Altaians are one." He stroked his beard and traded bland smiles with Flandry: a kindred hypocrite. "Our scout needed but to carry a few foam bombs himself, and no enemy vessel would molest him. He observ-

ed them and returned here in peace."

One of the visiting chieftains exclaimed: "Your noyon verges on blasphemy himself, Toghrul. Sir Dominic is from Terra! If a lord of Terra wishes to set a blaze, who dares deny him?"

Flandry felt he ought to blush, but decided not to. "Be that as it may," he said, "I couldn't think of any better plan. Not all the tribal leaders come to this—what do you call the meeting?—this kurultai, have heard just what happened. The girl Bourtai and myself were trapped with little power left in our varyaks, and the probability of freezing or starving in a few more days if we were not detected by infra-red that same night. So, soon after dark I scurried about on foot, setting fires which quickly coalesced into one. The wind swept the flames from us—but the radiation of our varyak heaters was still undetectable against such a background! Since we could not be extremely far as negagrav flight goes from some ordu of the Shamanate, it seemed likely that at least one aerial scout would come near to investigate the fire. Therefore, after a while, we broke radio silence to call for help. Then we ducked and dodged,

hunted by the gathering vessels of Oleg, somewhat screened by the heat and smoke . . . until a flying war party from the Mangú Tuman arrived, beat off the foe, and escaped with us before more of the enemy should arrive."

"And so this council has been called," added Toghrul Vavilov. "The chiefs of all our allied tribes must understand what we now face."

"But the fire—" mumbled Arghun.

Eyes went through gloom to an old man seated under the window. Furs covered frail Juchi Ilyak so thickly that his bald parchment-skinned head looked disembodied. The Shaman stroked a wisp of white beard, blinked eyes that were still sharp, and murmured with a dry little smile: "This is not the time to dispute whether the rights of a man from Holy Terra override the Yassa by which Altai lives. The question seems rather, how shall we all survive in order to raise such legal quibbles at another date?"

Arghun tossed his reddish-black hair and snorted: "Oleg's father, and the whole Nuru Bator dynasty before him, tried to beat down the Tebtengri. But still we hold the northlands. I do not

think this will change overnight."

"Oh, but it will," said Flan-dry in his softest voice. "Unless something is done, it will."

He treated himself to one of the few remaining cigarets and leaned forward so the light would pick out his features, exotic in this planet. He said: "Throughout your history, you have waged war, as you have driven your machines, with chemical power and stored solar energy. A few small, stationery nuclear generators at Ulan Baligh and the mines are all that your way of life demanded. Your economy would not have supported atomic war, even if feuds and boundary disputes were worth it. So you Tebtengri have remained strong enough to hold these subarctic pastures, though all other tribes were to ally against you. Am I right?"

They nodded. He continued: "But now Oleg Khan is getting help from outside. Some of his new toys I have seen with my own eyes. Craft which can fly flourishes around yours, or go beyond the atmosphere to swoop down again; battlecars whose armor your strongest chemical explosives cannot pierce; missiles to devastate so wide an area that no dispersal can save you. As yet, he has

not much modern equipment. But more will arrive during the next several months, until he has enough to crush you. And, still worse, he will have allies that are not human."

They stirred uneasily, some of them making signs against witchcraft. Only Juchi the Shaman remained quiet, watching Flandry with impassive eyes. A clay pipe in his hand sent bitter incense toward the roof. "Who are these creatures?" he asked calmly.

"Merseians," said Flandry. "Another imperial race than man—and man stands in the path of their ambitions. For long now we have been locked with them, nominally at peace, actually probing for weaknesses, subverting, assassinating, skirmishing. They have decided Altai would make a useful naval base. Outright invasion would be expensive, especially if Terra noticed and interfered: and we probably would notice, since we watch them so closely. But if the Merseians supply Oleg with just enough help so that he can conquer the whole planet for them—do you see? Once he has done that, the Merseian engineers will arrive; Altaians will dig and die to build fortresses; this entire world will be one impregnable

net of strongholds . . . and then Terra is welcome to learn what has been going on!"

"Does Oleg himself know this?" snapped Toghrlul.

Flandry shrugged. "Insufficiently well, I imagine. Like many another puppet ruler, he will live to see the strings his masters have tied on him. But that will be too late. I've watched this sort of thing happen elsewhere."

"*In fact,*" he added, "*I've helped bring it about, now and then—on Terra's behalf!*"

Toghrlul entwined nervous fingers. "I believe you," he said. "We have all had glimpses, heard rumors . . . What is to be done? Can we summon the Terrans?"

"Aye—aye—call the Terrans, warn the Mother of Men—" Flandry felt how passion flared up in the scarred warriors around him. He had gathered that the Tebtengri had no use for Subotai the Prophet, but built their own religion around a hard-boiled sort of humanistic pantheism. It grew on him how strong a symbol the ancestral planet was to them.

He didn't want to tell them what Terra was actually like these days. (Or perhaps had always been. He suspected men are only saints and heroes in retrospect.) Indeed, he

dare not speak of sottish Emperors, venal nobles, faithless wives, servile commons, to this armed and burning reverence. *But luckily, there's a practical problem at hand.*

"Terra is farther from here than Merseia," he said. "Even our nearest base is more distant than theirs. I don't believe any Merseians are on Altai at this moment, but surely Oleg has at least one swift spaceship at his disposal, to inform his masters if anything should go wrong. Let us get word to Terra, and let Oleg learn this has happened, what do you think he'll do?" Flandry nodded, owlish. "Right, on the first guess! Oleg will send to that nearest Merseian base, where I know a heavy naval force is currently stationed. I doubt very much if the Merseians will write off their investment tamely. No, they will dispatch their ships at once, occupy various points, blast the Tebtengri lands with nuclear bombs, and dig in. It will not be as smooth and thorough a job as they now plan, but it will be effective. By the time a Terran fleet of reasonable size can get here, the Merseians will be fairly well entrenched. The most difficult task in space warfare is to get a strong enemy off a planet firmly held. It may prove im-

possible. But even if, thanks to our precipitating matters, the Terrans do blast the Merseians loose, Altai will have been made into a radioactive desert.

Silence clapped down. Men stared at each other, and back to Flandry, with a horror he had seen before and which was one of the few things it still hurt him to watch. He went on quickly:

"So the one decent objective for us is to get a secret message out. If Oleg and the Merseians don't suspect Terra knows, they won't hasten their program. It can be Terra, instead, which suddenly arrives in strength, seizes Ulan Baligh, establishes ground emplacements and orbital forts. I know Merseian strategy well enough to predict that under those circumstances, they won't fight. It isn't worth it, since Altai cannot be used as an aggressive base against them." He should have said *will not*; but let these people make the heartbreaking discovery for themselves, that Terra's only real interest was to preserve a fat status quo.

Arghun sprang to his feet. As he crouched under the low ceiling, primness dropped from him. His young leonine face became a sun, he cried:

"And Terra will have us! We will be restored to human-kind!"

While the Tebtengri whooped and wept at that understanding, Flandry smoked his cigaret with care. After all, he thought, it needn't corrupt them. Not too much. There would be a small naval base, an Imperial governor, an enforced peace between all tribes. Otherwise they could live as they chose. It wasn't worth Terra's while to proselytize. What freedom the Altaians lost here at home, their young men would regain simply by having access to the stars. Wasn't that so? Wasn't it?

Juchi the Shaman, who bound together all these chiefs, spoke in a whisper that pierced: "Let us have silence. We must weigh how this may be done."

Flandry waited till the men had seated themselves. Then he gave them a rueful smile. "That's a good question," he said. "Next question, please."

"The Betelgeuseans—" rumbled Toghrul.

"I doubt that," said another gur-khan. "If I were Oleg the Damned, I would put a guard around every individual Betelgeusean, as well as every spaceship, until all danger has

passed. I would inspect every trade article, every fur or hide or smokegem, before it was loaded."

"Or send to Merseia at once," shivered someone else.

"No," said Flandry. "Not that. We can be sure Merseia is not going to take such hazardous action without being fairly sure that Terra has heard of their project. They have too many commitments elsewhere."

"Besides," said Juchi, "Oleg Yesukai will not make himself a laughing stock before them—screaming for help because one fugitive is loose in the Khrebet."

"Anyhow," put in Toghrul, "he knows how impossible it is to smuggle such an appeal out. Those tribes not of the Shamanate may dislike the Yesukai tyranny, but they are still more suspicious of us, who traffic with the Ice Dwellers and scoff at that stupid Prophet. Even supposing one of them *would* agree to brand a hide for us, or slip a letter into a bale of pelts, and even supposing that did get past Oleg's inspectors, the cargo might wait months to be loaded, months more in some Betelgeusean warehouse."

"And we don't have so many months, I suppose, before Oleg overruns you and the Merse-

ians arrive as planned," finished Flandry.

He sat for a while listening to their desperate chewing of impractical schemes. It was hot and stuffy in here. All at once he could take no more. He rose. "I need fresh air, and a chance to think," he said.

Juchi nodded grave dismissal. Arghun jumped up again. "I come too," he said.

"If the Terran desires your company," said Toghrul.

"Indeed, indeed." Flandry's agreement was absent-minded.

He went out the door and down a short ladder. The kibitka where the chiefs met was a large, covered truck, its box fitted out as austere living quarters. On top of it, as on all the bigger, slower vehicles, the flat black plates of a solar-energy collector were tilted to face Krasna and charge an accumulator bank. Such roofs made this wandering town, dispersed across the hills, seem like a flock of futuristic turtles.

The Khrebet was not a high range. Gullied slopes ran up, gray-green with thornbush and yellow with sere grass, to a glacial cap in the north. Downward swept a cold wind, whining about Flandry; he shivered and drew the coat hastily sewn to his measure

tighter about him. The sky was pale today, the rings low and wan in the south, where the hills emptied into steppe.

As far as Flandry could see, the herds of the Mangu Tuman spread out under care of varyak-mounted boys. They were not cattle. Terras' higher mammals were hard to raise on other planets; rodents are tougher and more adaptable. The first colonists had brought rabbits along, which they mutated and cross-bred systematically. That ancestor could hardly be recognized in the cow-sized grazing beasts of today, more like giant dun guineau pigs than anything else. There were also separate flocks of bio-engineered ostriches.

Arghun gestured with pride.

"Yonder is the library," he said, "and those children seated nearby are being instructed."

Flandry looked at that kibitka. Of course, given microprint, you could carry thousands of volumes along on your travels; illiterates could never have operated these ground vehicles or the nega-grav aircraft watchful overhead. Certain other trucks—including some trains of them—must house arsenals, sick-bay, machine tools, small fac-

tories for textiles and ceramics. Poorer families might live crowded in a single yurt, a round felt tent on a motor cart; but no one looked hungry or ragged. And it was not an impoverished nation which carried such gleaming missiles on flatbed cars, or operated such a flock of light tanks, or armed every adult. Considering Bourtai, Flandry decided that the entire tribe, male and female, must be a military as well as a social and economic unit. Everybody worked, and everybody fought, and in their system the proceeds were more evenly shared than on Terra.

"Where does your metal come from?" he inquired.

"The grazing lands of every tribe include some mines," said Arghun. "We plan our yearly round so as to spend time there, digging and smelting—just as elsewhere we reap grain planted on the last visit, or tap crude oil from our wells and refine it. What we cannot produce ourselves, we trade with others to get."

"It sounds like a virtuous life," said Flandry.

His slight shudder did not escape Arghun, who hastened to say: "Oh, we have our pleasures too, feasts, games and sports, the arts, the great

fair at Kievka Hill each third year—." He broke off.

Bourtai came walking past a campfire. Flandry could sense her loneliness. Women in this culture were not much inferior to men; she was free to go where she would, and was a heroine for having brought the Terran here. But her family were slain and she was not even given work to do.

She saw the men and ran toward them. "Oh . . . what has been decided?"

"Nothing yet." Flandry caught her hands. By all hot stars, she was a good-looking wench! His face crinkled its best smile. "I couldn't see going in circles with a lot of men, hairy however well-intentioned, when I might be going in circles with you. So I came out here. And my hopes were granted."

A flush crept up her high flat cheeks. She wasn't used to glibness. Her gaze fluttered downward. "I do not know what to say," she whispered.

"You need say nothing. Only be," he leered.

"No—I am no one. The daughter of a dead man . . . my dowry long ago plundered . . . And you are a Terran! It is not right!"

"Do you think your dowry matters?" said Arghun. His voice cracked over.

Flandry threw him a surprised glance. At once the warrior's mask was restored. But for an instant, Flandry had seen why Arghun Tilik-sky didn't like him.

He sighed. "Come, we had better return to the kurultai," he said.

He didn't release Bourtai, but tucked her arm under his. She followed mutely along. He could feel her tremble a little, through the heavy garments. The wind off the glacier ruffled a stray lock of dark hair.

As they neared the kibitka of the council, its door opened. Juchi Ilyak stood there, bent beneath his years. The wizened lips opened, and somehow the breath carried across meters of blustering air: "Terran, perhaps there is a way for us. Dare you come with me to the Ice Folk?"

Tengri Nor, the Ghost Lake, lay so far north that Altai's rings were only a pale glimmer, half seen by night on the southern horizon. When Flandry and Juchi stepped from their airboat, it was still day. Krasna was an ember, tinging the snowfields red. But it toppled swiftly, purple shadows glided from drift to drift so fast a man could see them.

Flandry had not often met such quietness. Even in space,

there was always the low noise of the machinery that kept you alive. Here, the air seemed to freeze all sound; the tiniest wind blew up fine ice crystals, whirling and glistening above diamond-like snowbanks, and it rippled the waters of Tengri Nor, but he could not hear it. He had no immediate sense of cold on his fur-muffled body, even on his thickly greased face—not in this dry atmosphere—but breathing was a sharpness in his nostrils. He thought he could smell the lake, a chemical pungency, but he wasn't sure. None of his Terran senses were quite to be trusted in this winter place.

He said, and the unexpected loudness was like a gunshot, shocking, so that his question ended in a whisper: "Do they know we are here?"

"Oh, yes. They have their ways. They will meet us soon." Juchi looked northward, past the lakeshore to the mountainous ruins. Snow had drifted halfway up those marble walls, white on white, with the final sunlight bleeding across shattered colonnades. Frost from the Shaman's breath began to stiffen his beard.

"I suppose they recognize the markings—know this is a friendly craft—but what if the Kha Khan sent a disguised vessel?"

"That was tried once or twice, years ago. The boats were destroyed by some means, far south of here. The Dwellers have their awarenesses." Juchi raised his arms and started swaying on his feet. A high-pitched chant came from his lips, he threw back his head and closed his eyes.

Flandry had no idea whether the Shaman was indulging superstition, practicing formal ritual, or doing what was actually necessary to summon the glacier folk. He had been in too many strange places to dogmatize. He waited, his eyes ranging the scene.

Beyond the ruins, westward along the northern lakeshore, a forest grew. White slender trees with intricate, oddly geometric branches flashed like icicles, like jewels. Their thin bluish leaves vibrated, it seemed they should tinkle, that all this forest was glass, but Flandry had never been near a wilderness so quiet. Low gray plants carpeted the snow between the gleaming boles. Where a rock thrust up here and there, it was almost buried under such lichenoid growth. In some place less cold and hushed, Flandry would have thought of tropical richness.

The lake itself reached out

of sight, pale blue between snowbanks. As evening swept across the waters, Flandry could see against shadow that mists hovered above.

Juchi had told him, quite matter-of-factly, that the protoplasmic life native to Altai had adapted to low temperatures in past ages by synthesizing methanol. A fifty-fifty mixture of this and water remained fluid below minus forty degrees. When it finally must freeze, it did not expand into cell-disrupting ice crystals, but became gradually more slushy. Lower life forms remained functional till about seventy below, Centigrade; after that they went dormant. The higher animals, being homeothermic, need not suspend animation till the air reached minus a hundred degrees.

Biological accumulation of alcohol kept the polar lakes and rivers fluid till midwinter. The chief problem of all species was to find minerals, in a world largely glaciated. Bacteria brought up some from below; animals traveled far to lick exposed rock, returned to their forests and contributed heavy atoms when they died. But in general, the Altaian ecology made do without. It had never evolved bones, for instance, but had elaborated

chitinous and cartilaginous materials beyond anything seen on Terra.

The account had sounded plausible and interesting, in a warm kibitka on a grassy slope, with microtexts at hand to give details. When he stood on million-year-old snow, and watching night creep up like smoke through crystal trees and cyclopean ruins, hearing Juchi chant under a huge green sunset sky, Flandry discovered that scientific explanations were but little of the truth.

One of the moons was up. Flandry saw something drift across its copper shield. The objects neared, a flock of white spheres, ranging in diameter from a few centimeters to a giant bigger than the airboat. Tentacles streamed downward from them. Juchi broke off. "Ah," he said. "Aeromedusae. The Dwellers cannot be far."

"What?" Flandry hugged himself. The cold was beginning to be felt now, as it gnawed through fur and leather toward flesh.

"Our name for them. They look primitive, but are actually well evolved, with sense organs and brains. They electrolyze hydrogen metabolically, to inflate themselves, breathe backward for propul-

sion, fed on small game which they shock insensible. The Ice Folk have domesticated them."

Flandry stole a glance at a jagged wall, rearing above gloom to catch a sunbeam and flush rose. "They did more than that, once," he said with pity.

Juchi nodded, oddly little impressed. "I daresay intelligence grew up on Altai in response to worsening conditions—the warming sun." His tone was detached. "It built a high civilization, but the shortage of metals was a handicap, and the steady shrinking of the snow area may have led to a cultural collapse. Yet that is not what the Dwellers themselves claim. They have no sense of loss about their past." He squinted slant eyes in a frown, seeking words. "As nearly as I can understand them, which is not much, they . . . abandoned something unsuitable . . . they found better methods."

Two beings came from the forest.

At first glance they were like dwarfish white-furred men. Then you saw details of squat build and rubbery limbs. The feet were long and webbed, expandable to broad snowshoes or foldable to short skis. The hands had three fingers opposing a thumb set in the

middle of the wrist. The ears were feathery tufts; fine tendrils waved above each round black eye; sad gray monkey faces peered from a ruff of hair. Their breath did not steam like the humans': their body temperature was well below the Centigrade zero. One of them bore a stone lamp in which an alcohol flame wavered. The other had an intricately carved white staff; in an undefinable way, the circling medusa flock seemed to be guided by it.

They came near, halted, and waited. Nothing moved but the low wind, ruffling their fur and streaming the flame. Juchi stood as quiet. Flandry made himself conform, though his teeth wanted to clap in his jaws. He had seen many kinds of life, on worlds more foreign than this. But there was a strangeness here which got under his skin and crawled.

The sun went down. Thin dustless air gave no twilight. Stars blazed forth, pyrotechnic in a sudden blackness. The edge of the rings painted a remote arc. The moon threw cuprous radiance over the snow, shadows into the forest.

A meteor split the sky with noiseless lightning. Juchi seemed to take that as a signal. He began talking. His voice was

like ice, toning as it contracted in midnight cold: not altogether a human voice. Flandry began to understand what a Shaman was, and why he presided over the northland tribes. Few men were able to master the Dwellers' language and deal with them. Yet trade and alliance—metal given for organic fuel and curious plastic substances; mutual defense against the Kha Khan's sky raiders—was a large part of the Tebtengri strength.

One of the beings made answer. Juchi turned to Flandry. "I have said who you are and whence you come. They are not surprised. Before I spoke your need, he said their—I do not know just what the word means, but it has something to do with communication—he said they could reach Terra itself, as far as mere distance was concerned, but only through . . . dreams?"

Flandry stiffened. It could be. It could be. How long had men been hunting for some faster-than-light equivalent of radio? A handful of centuries. What was that, compared to the age of the universe? Or even the age of Altai? He realized, not simply intellectually but with his whole organism, how old this planet was. In all that time—

"Telepathy?" he blurted.

"I've never heard of telepathy with so great a range!"

"No. Not that, or they would have warned us of this Merseian situation before now. It is nothing that I quite understand." Juchi spoke with care: "He said to me, all the powers they possess look useless in this situation."

Flandry sighed. "I might have known it. That would have been too easy. No chance for heriocs."

"They have found means to live, less cumbersome than all those buildings and engines were," said Juchi. "They have been free to think for I know not how many ages. But they have therefore grown weak in sheerly material ways. They help us withstand the aggressions from Ulan Baligh; they can do nothing against the might of Merseia."

Half seen in red moonlight, one of the autochthones spoke.

Juchi: "They do not fear racial death. They know all things must end, and yet nothing ever really ends. However, it would be desirable that their lesser brethren in the ice forests have a few more million years to live, so that they may also evolve toward truth."

Which is a fine, resounding ploy, thought Flandry, provided it be not the simple fact.

Juchi: "They, like us, are

willing to become clients of the Terrestrial Empire. To them, it means nothing; they will never have enough in common with men to be troubled by any human governors. They know Terra will not gratuitously harm them—whereas Merseia would, if only by provoking that planet-wide battle of space fleets you describe. Therefore, the Cold People will assist us in any way they can, though they know of none at present."

"Do these two speak for their whole race?" asked Flandry dubiously.

"And for the forests and the lakes," said Juchi.

Flandry thought of a life which was all of one great organism, and nodded. "If you say so, I'll accept it. But if they can't help—"

Juchi gave an old man's sigh, like wind over the acrid waters. "I had hoped they could. But now—Have you no plan of your own?"

Flandry stood a long time, feeling the chill creep inward. At last he said: "If the only spaceships are at Ulan Baligh, then it seems we must get into the city somehow, to deliver our message. Have these folk any means of secretly contacting a Betelgeusean?"

Juchi inquired. "No," he

translated the answer. "Not if the traders are closely guarded, and their awareness tells them that is so."

One of the natives stooped forward a little, above the dull blue fire, so that his face was illuminated. Could as human an emotion as sorrow really be read into those eyes? Words droned. Juchi listened.

"They can get us into the city, undetected, if it be a cold enough night," he said. "The medusae can carry us through the air, actually seeing radar beams and eluding them. And, of course, a medusa is invisible to metal detectors as well as infra-red scopes." The Shaman paused. "But what use is that, Terra man? We ourselves can walk disguised into Ulan Baligh."

"But could we fly—?" Flandry's voice trailed off.

"Not without being stopped by traffic control officers and investigated."

"S-s-so." Flandry raised his face to the glittering sky. He took the moonlight full in his eyes and was briefly dazzled. Tension tingled along his nerves.

"We've debated trying to radio a Betelgeusean ship as it takes off, before it goes into secondary drive." He spoke aloud, slowly, to get the hammering within himself under

control. "But you said the Teb-tengri have no set powerful enough to broadcast that far, thousands of kilometers. And, of course, we couldn't beam-cast, since we couldn't pinpoint the ship at any instant."

"True. In any event, the Khan's aerial patrols would detect our transmission and pounce."

"Suppose a ship, a friendly spaceship, came near this planet without actually landing . . . could the Ice Dwellers communicate with it?"

Juchi asked, Flandry did not need the translated answer: "No. They have no radio sets at all. Even if they did, their 'casting would be as liable to detection as ours. And did you not say yourself, Orluk, all our messages must be kept secret, right to the moment that the Terran fleet arrives in strength? That Oleg Khan must not even suspect a message has been sent?"

"Well, no harm in asking." Flandry's gaze continued to search upward, till he found Betelgeuse like a torch among the constellations. "Could we *know* there was such a ship in the neighborhood?"

"I daresay it would radio as it approached . . . notify Ulan Baligh spaceport—" Juchi conferred with the non-

humans. "Yes. We could have men, borne by medusae, stationed unnoticeably far above the city. They could carry receivers. There would be enough beam leakage for them to listen to any conversation between the spaceship and the portmaster. Would that serve?"

Flandry breathed out in a great freezing gust. "It might."

Suddenly, and joyously, he laughed. Perhaps no such sound had ever rung across Tengri Nor. The Dwellers started back, like frightened small animals. Juchi stood in shadow. For that instant, only Captain Dominic Flandry of Imperial Terra had light upon him. He stood with his head raised into the copper moonlight, and laughed like a boy.

"By Heaven," he shouted, "we're going to do it!"

An autumn gale came down off the pole. It gathered snow on its way across the steppe, and struck Ulan Baligh near midnight. In minutes, the steep red roofs were lost to sight. Close by a lighted window, a man saw horizontal white streaks, whirling out of darkness and back into darkness. If he went a few meters away, pushing through drifts already knee-high, the light

was gone. He stood blind, buffeted by the storm, and heard it rave.

Flandry descended from the upper atmosphere. Its cold had smitten so deep he thought he might never be warm again. In spite of an oxygen tank, his lungs were starving. He saw the blizzard from above as a moon-dappled black blot, the early ice floes on Ozero Rurik dashed to and fro along its southern fringe. A cabling of tentacles meshed him, he sat under a giant balloon rushing downward through the sky. Behind him trailed a flock of other medusae, twisting along air currents he could not feel to avoid radar beams he could not see. Ahead of him was only one, bearing a Dweller huddled against a cake of ice; for what lay below was hell's own sulfurous wind to the native.

Even Flandry felt how much warmer it was, when the snowstorm enclosed him. He crouched forward, squinting into a nothingness that yelled. Once his numbed feet, dangling down, struck a roof-tree. The blow came as if from far away, palely at first, strengthening as he neared, the Prophet's Tower thrust its luminous shaft up and out of sight.

Flandry groped for the nozzle at his shoulder. His desti-

nation gave just enough light for him to see through the driven flakes. Another medusa crowded close, bearing a pressure tank of paint. Somehow, Flandry reached across the air between and made the hose fast.

Now, Arctic intelligence, do you understand what I want to do? Can you guide this horse of mine for me?

The wind yammered in his ears. He heard other noises like blasting, the powerful breaths by which his medusa moved itself. Almost, he was battered against the tablet wall. His carrier wobbled in midair, fighting to maintain position. An inlaid letter, big as a house, loomed before him, black against shining white. He aimed his hose and squirted.

Damn! The green jet was flung aside in a flaw of wind. He corrected his aim and saw the paint strike. It remained liquid even at this temperature . . . no matter, it was sticky enough . . . The first tank was quickly used up. Flandry coupled to another. Blue this time. All the Tebtengri had contributed all the squirtable paint they had, every hue in God's rainbow. Flandry could but hope there would be enough.

There was, though he came near fainting from chill and exhaustion before the end of the job. He could not remember ever having so brutal a task. Even so, when the last huge stroke was done, he could not resist adding an exclamation point at the very bottom—three centimeters high.

"Let's go," he whispered. Somehow, the mute Dweller understood and pointed his staff. The medusa flock sprang through the clouds.

Flandry had a moment's glimpse of a military airboat. It had detached itself from the flock hovering above the spaceport, perhaps going off duty. As the medusae broke from the storm, into clear moonlight and ringlight, the craft veered. Flandry saw its guns stab energy bolts into the flock, and reached for his own futile blaster. His fingers were wooden, they didn't close . . .

The medusae, all but his and the Dweller's whipped about. They surrounded the patrol boat, laid tentacles fast and clung. It was nearly buried under them. Electric fires crawled, sparks dripped, these creatures could break hydrogen from water. Flandry recalled in a dull part of his mind that a metallic fuselage was a Faraday cage, immune to lightning. But when con-

centrated electric discharges burned holes, spotwelded control circuits—the boat staggered in midair. The medusae detached themselves. The boat plummeted.

Flandry relaxed and let his creature bear him northward.

The town seethed. There had been rioting in the Street of Gunsmiths, and blood still dappled the new-fallen snow. Armed men tramped around palace and spaceport; mobs hooted beyond them. From the lakeshore encampments came war music, pipes squealed, gongs crashed, the young men rode their varyaks in break-neck circles and cursed.

Oleg Khan looked out the palace window. "It shall be made good to you," he muttered. "Oh, yes, my people, you shall have satisfaction."

Turning to the Betelgeusean, who had just been fetched, he glared into the blue face. "You have seen?"

"Yes, your majesty." Zalat's Altaian, usually fluent and little accented, grew thick. He was a badly shaken being. Only the quick arrival of the royal guards had saved his ship from destruction by a thousand shrieking fanatics. "I swear, I, my crew, we had nothing to do with . . . we are innocent as —"

"Of course! Of course!" Oleg Yesukai brought one palm down in an angry slicing motion. "I am not one of those ignorant rodent herders. Every Betelgeusean has been under supervision, every moment since —" He checked himself.

"I have still not understood why," faltered Zalat.

"Was my reason not made clear to you? You know the Terran visitor was killed by Tebtengri operatives, the very day he arrived. It bears out what I have long suspected, these tribes have become religiously xenophobic. Since they doubtless have other agents in the city, who will try to murder your people in turn, it is best all of you be closely guarded, have contact only with men we know are loyal, until I have full control of the situation."

His own words calmed Oleg somewhat. He sat down, stroked his beard and watched Zalat from narrowed eyes. "Your difficulties this morning are regrettable," he continued smoothly. "Because you are outworlders, and the defiling symbols are not in the Altaian alphabet, many people leaped to the conclusion that it was some dirty word in your language. I, of course, know bet-

ter. I also know from the exact manner in which a patrol craft was lost last night, how this outrage was done: unquestionably by Tebtengri, with the help of the Arctic devil-folk. Such a vile deed would not trouble them in the least; they are not followers of the Prophet. But what puzzles me—I admit this frankly, though confidentially—*why?* A daring, gruelling task . . . merely for a wanton insult?"

He glanced back toward the window. From this angle, the crimson Tower looked itself. You had to be on the north to see what had been done: the tablet wall disfigured by more than a kilometer of splashed paint. But from that side, the fantastic desecration was visible across entire horizons.

The Kha Khan doubled a fist. "It shall be repaid them," he said. "This has rallied the orthodox tribes behind me as no other thing imaginable. When their children are boiled before their eyes, the Tebtengri will realize what they have done."

Zalat hesitated. "Your majesty—"

"Yes?" Oleg snarled, as he must at something.

"Those symbols are letters of the Terran alphabet."

"What?"

"I know the Anglic lan-

guage somewhat," said Zalat. "Many Betelgeuseans do. But how could those Tebtengri ever have learned—"

Oleg, who knew the answer to that, interrupted by seizing the captain's tunic and shaking him. "What does it say?" he cried.

"That's the strangest part, your majesty," stammered Zalat. "It doesn't mean anything. Not that makes sense."

"Well, what sound does it spell, then? Speak before I have your teeth pulled!"

"Mayday," choked Zalat. "Just Mayday, your majesty."

Oleg let him go. For a while there was silence. At last the Khan said: "Is that a Terran word?"

"Well . . . it could be. I mean, well, May is the name of a month in the Terran calendar, and Day means 'diurnal period.' " Zalat rubbed his yellow eyes, searching for logic. "I suppose Mayday could mean the first day of May."

Oleg nodded slowly. "That sounds reasonable. The Altai-an calendar, which is modified from the ancient Terran, has a similar name for a month of what is locally springtime. Mayday—spring festival day? Perhaps."

He returned to the window and brooded across the city.

"It's long until May," he said. "If that was an incitement to . . . anything . . . it's foredoomed. We are going to break the Tebtengri this very winter. By next spring—" He cleared his throat and finished curtly: "Certain other projects will be well under way."

"How could it be an incitement, anyhow, your majesty?" argued Zalat, emboldened. "Who in Ulan Baligh could read it?"

"True. I can only conjecture, some wild act of defiance—or superstition, magical ritual—" The Khan turned on his heel. "You are leaving shortly, are you not?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"You shall convey a message. No other traders are to come here for a standard year. We will have troubles enough, suppressing the Tebtengri and their aboriginal allies." Oleg shrugged. "In any event, it would be useless for merchants to visit us. War will disrupt the caravans. Afterward—perhaps."

Privately, he doubted it. By summer, the Merseians would have returned and started work on their base. A year from now, Altai would be firmly in their empire, and, under them, the Kha Khan would lead his warriors to battles in the stars, more glorious than

any of the hero songs had ever dreamed.

Winter came early to the northlands. Flandry, following the Mangu Tuman in their migratory cycle, saw snow endless across the plains, under a sky like blued steel. The tribe, wagons and herds and people, were a hatful of dust strewn on immensity: here a moving black blot, there a thin smoke-streak vertical in windless air. Krasna hung low in the southeast, a frosty red-gold wheel.

Three folk glided from the main ordu. They were on ski, rifles slung behind their parkas, hands holding tethers which led to a small negagrav tow unit. It flew quickly, so that the skis sang on the thin crisp snow.

Arghun Tiliksky said hard-voiced: "I can appreciate that you and Juchi keep secret the reason for that Tower escapade of yours, five weeks ago. What none of us know, none can reveal if captured. Yet you seem quite blithe about the consequences. Our scouts tells us that infuriated warriors flock to Oleg Khan, that he has pledged to annihilate us this very year. In consequence, all the Tebtengri must remain close together, not spread along the whole Arctic

Circle as before—and hereabouts, there is not enough forage under the snow for that many herds. I say to you, the Khan need only wait, and by the end of the season famine will have done half his work for him!"

"Let's hope he plans on that," said Flandry. "Less strenuous than fighting, isn't it?"

Arghun's angry young face turned toward him. The noyon clipped: "I do not share this awe of all things Terran. You are as human as I. In this environment, where you are untrained, you are much more fallible. I warn you plainly, unless you give me good reason to do otherwise, I shall request a kurultai. And at it I will argue that we strike now at Ulan Baligh, try for a decision while we can still count on full bellies."

Bourtai cried aloud, "No! That would be asking for ruin. They outnumber us down there, three or four to one. And I have seen some of the new engines the Merseians brought. It would be butchery!"

"It would be quick." Arghun glared at Flandry. "Well?"

The Terran sighed. He might have expected it. Bourtai was always near him, and Arghun was always near

Bourtai, and the officer had spoken surly words before now. He might have known that this invitation to hunt a flock of sataru—mutant ostriches escaped from the herds and gone wild—masked something else. At least it was decent of Arghun to warn him.

"If you don't trust me," he said, "though Lord knows I've fought and bled and frostbitten my nose in your cause—can't you trust Juchi Ilyak? He and the Dwellers know my little scheme; they'll assure you it depends on our hanging back and avoiding battle."

"Juchi grows old," said Arghun. "His mind is as feeble as— Hoy, there!"

He yanked a guide line. The negagrav unit purred to a stop and hung in air, halfway up a long slope. His politics dropped from Arghun, he pointed at the snow with a hunting dog's eagerness. "Spoor," he hissed. "We go by muscle power now, to sneak close. The birds can outrun this motor if they hear it. Do you go straight up this hill, Orluk Flandry; Bourtai and I will come around on opposite sides of it—"

The Altaians had slipped their reins and skied noiselessly from him before Flandry

quite understood what had happened. Looking down, the Terran saw big splay tracks: a pair of sataru. He started after them. How the deuce did you manage these foot-sticks, anyway? Waddling across the slope, he tripped himself and went down. His nose clipped a boulder. He sat up, swearing in eighteen languages and Old Martian phonoglyphs.

"This they call fun?" He tottered erect. Snow had gotten under his parka hood. It began to melt, trickling over his ribs in search of a really good place to refreeze. "Great greasy comets," said Flandry, "I might have been sitting in the Everest House with a bucket of champagne, lying to some beautiful wench about my exploits . . . but no, I had to come out here and do 'em!"

Slowly, he dragged himself up the hill, crouched on its brow, and peered through an unnecessarily cold and thorny bush. No two-legged birds, only a steep slant back down to the plain . . . Wait!

He saw blood and the dismembered avian shapes an instant before the beasts attacked him.

They seemed to rise from weeds and snowdrifts, as if the earth had spewed them. Noiselessly they rushed in, a dozen white scuttering forms

big as police dogs. Flandry glimpsed long sharp noses, alert black eyes that hated him, high backs and hairless tails. He yanked his rifle loose and fired. The slug bowled the nearest animal over. It rolled halfway downhill, lay a while, and crawled back to fight some more.

Flandry didn't see it. The next was upon him. He shot it point blank. One of its fellows crouched to tear the flesh. But the rest ran on. Flandry took aim at a third. A heavy body landed between his shoulders. He went down, and felt jaws rip his leather coat.

He rolled over, somehow, shielding his face with one arm. His rifle had been torn from him: a beast fumbled it in forepaws almost like hands. He groped for the dagger at his belt. Two of the animals were on him, slashing with chisel teeth. He managed to kick one in the nose. It squealed, bounced away, sprang back with a couple of new arrivals to help.

Someone yelled. It sounded very far off, drowned by Flandry's own heartbeat. The Terran drove his knife into a hairy shoulder. The beast writhed free, leaving him weaponless. Now they were piling on him where he lay.

He fought with boots and knees, fists and elbows, in a cloud of kicked-up snow. An animal jumped in the air, came down on his midriff. The wind whoofed out of him. His face-defending arm dropped, and the creature went for his throat.

Arghun came up behind. The Altaian seized the animal by the neck. His free hand flashed steel, he disembowled it and flung it toward the pack in one expert movement. Several of them fell on the still snarling shape and fed. Arghun booted another exactly behind the ear. It dropped as if poleaxed. One jumped from the rear, to get on his back. He stooped, his right hand made a judo heave, and as the beast soared over his head he ripped its stomach with his knife.

"Up, man!" He hoisted Flandry. The Terran stumbled beside him, while the pack chattered around. Now its outliers began to fall dead: Bourtai had regained the hillcrest and was sniping. The largest of the animals whistled. At that signal, the survivors bounded off. They were lost to view in seconds.

When they had reached Bourtai, Arghun sank down gasping. The girl flew to Flandry. "Are you hurt?" she sobbed.

"Only in my pride—I guess—" He looked past her to the noyon. "Thanks," he said inadequately.

"You are a guest," grunted Arghun. After a moment: "They grow bolder each year. I had never expected to be attacked this near an ordu. Something must be done about them, if we live through the winter."

"What are they?" Flandry shuddered toward relaxation.

"Gurchaku. They range in packs over all the steppes, up into the Khrebet. They will eat anything, but prefer meat. Chiefly sataru and other feral animals, but they raid our herds, have killed people—" Arghun looked grim. "They were not as large in my grandfather's day, nor as cunning."

Flandry nodded. "Rats. Which is not an exclamation."

"I know what rats are," said Bourtai. "But the gurchaku—"

"A new genus. Similar things have happened on other colonized planets." Flandry wished for a cigaret. He wished so hard that Bourtai had to remind him before he continued: "Oh, yes. Some of the stowaway rats on your ancestors' ships must have gone into the wilds, as these began to be Terrestrialized. Size was

advantageous: helped them keep warm, enabled them to prey on the big animals you were developing. Selection pressure, short generations, genetic drift within a small original population . . . Nature is quite capable of forced-draft evolution on her own hook."

He managed a tired grin at Bourtai. "After all," he said, "if a frontier planet has beautiful girls, tradition requires that it have monsters as well."

Her blush was like fire.

They returned to camp in silence. Flandry entered the yurt given him, washed and changed clothes, lay down on his bunk and stared at the ceiling. He reflected bitterly on all the Terran romancing he had ever heard, the High Frontier in general and the dashing adventurers of the Intelligence Corps in particular. So what did it amount to? A few nasty moments with men or giant rats that wanted to kill you; stinking leather clothes, wet feet, chilblains and frostbite, unseasoned food, creaking wheels exchanged for squealing runners; temperance, chastity, early rising, weighty speech with tribal elders, not a book he could enjoy or a joke he could understand for light-years. He

yawned, rolled over on his stomach, tried to sleep, gave up after a while, and began to wish Arghun's reckless counsel would be accepted. Anything to break this dreariness!

It tapped on the door. He started to his feet, bumped his head on a curved ridgepole, swore, and said: "Come in." The caution of years laid his hand on a blaster.

The short day was near an end, only a red streak above one edge of the world. His lamp picked out Bourtai. She entered, closed the door, and stood unspeaking.

"Why . . . hullo." Flandry paused. "What brings you here?"

"I came to see if you were indeed well." Her eyes did not meet his.

"Oh? Oh, yes. Yes, of course," he said stupidly. "Kind of you. I mean, uh, shall I make some tea?"

"If you were bitten, it should be tended," said the girl. "Gurchaku bites can be infectious."

"No, thanks, I escaped any actual wounds." Automatically, Flandry added with a smile: "I could wish otherwise, though. So fair a nurse—"

Again he saw the blood rise in her face. Suddenly he un-

derstood. He would have realized earlier, had these people not been more reticent than his own. A heavy pulse beat in his throat. "Sit down," he invited.

She lowered herself to the floor. He joined her, sliding a practiced arm over her shoulder. She did not flinch. He let his hand glide lower, till the arm was around her waist. She leaned against him.

"Do you think we will see another springtime?" she asked. Her tone grew steady once more, it was a quite practical question.

"I have one right here with me," he said. His lips brushed her dark hair.

"No one speaks thus in the ordu," she breathed. Quickly: "We are both cut off from our kindred, you by distance and I by death. Let us not remain lonely."

He forced himself to give fair warning: "I shall return to Terra the first chance I get."

"I know," she cried, "but until then—"

His lips found hers.

There was a thump on the door.

"Go away!" Flandry and Bourtai said it together, looked surprised into each other's eyes, and laughed with pleasure.

"My lord," called a man's voice, "Toghrul Gur-Khan sends me. A message has been picked up—a Terran spaceship!"

Flandry knocked Bourtai over in his haste to get outside. But even as he ran, he thought with frustration that this job had been hoodooed from the outset.

Among the thin winds over Ulan Baligh, hidden by sheer height, a warrior sat in the patient arms of a medusa. He breathed oxygen from a tank and rested numbed fingers on a small radio transceiver. After four hours he was relieved; perhaps no other breed of human could have endured so long a watch.

Finally he was rewarded. His earphones crackled with a faint, distorted voice, speaking no language he had ever heard. A return beam gabbled from the spaceport. The man up above gave place to another, who spoke a halting, accented Altaian, doubtless learned from the Betelgeuseans.

The scout of the Tebtengri dared not try any communication of his own. If detected (and the chances were that it would be) such a call would bring a nuclear missile streaking upward from Ulan Baligh.

However, his transceiver could amplify and relay what came to it. Medusae elsewhere carried similar sets: a long chain, ending in the ordu of Toghrul Vavilov. Were that re-transmission intercepted by the enemy, no one would be alarmed. They would take it for some freak of reflection off the ionosphere.

The scout's binoculars actually showed him the Terran spaceship as it descended. He whistled in awe at its sleek, armed swiftness. Still, he thought, it was only one vessel, paying a visit to Oleg the Damned, who had carefully disguised all his modern installations. Oleg would be like butter to his guests, they would see what he wished them to see and no more. Presently they would go home again, to report that Altai was a harmless half-barbaric outpost, safely forgettable.

The scout sighed, beat gloved hands together, and wished his relief would soon arrive.

And up near the Arctic Circle, Dominic Flandry turned from Toghrul's receiver. A frosted window framed his head with the early northern night. "That's it," he said. "We'll maintain our radio monitors, but I don't expect to pick up anything else inter-

esting, except the moment when the ship takes off again."

"When will that be?" asked the Gur-Khan.

"In a couple of days, I imagine," said Flandry. "We've got to be ready! All the tribesmen must be alerted, must move out on the plains according to the scheme Juchi and I drew up for you."

Toghrul nodded. Arghun Tiliksky, who had also crowded into the kibitka, demanded: "What scheme is this? Why have I not been told?"

"You didn't need to know," Flandry answered. Blandly: "The warriors of Tebtengri can be moving at top speed, ready for battle, on five minutes' notice, under any conditions whatsoever. Or so you were assuring me, in a ten-minute speech, one evening last week. Very well, move them, noyon!"

Arghun bristled. "And then—"

"You will lead the Mangutuman varyak division straight south for 500 kilometers," said Toghrul. "There you will await radio orders. The other tribal forces will be stationed elsewhere; you will doubtless see a few, but strict radio silence is to be maintained between you. The less mobile vehicles will

have to stay in this general region, with the women and children maneuvering them."

"And the herds," reminded Flandry. "Don't forget, we can cover quite a large area with all the Tebtengri herds."

"But this is lunacy!" yelled Arghun. "If Oleg knows we're spread out in such a manner, and drives a wedge through—"

"He won't know," said Flandry. "Or if he does, he won't know why: which is what counts. Now, git!"

For a moment Arghun's eyes clashed with his. Then the noyon slapped gauntlets against one thigh, whirled, and departed. It was indeed only a few moments before the night grew loud with varyak motors and lowing battle horns.

When that had faded, Toghrul tugged his beard, looked across the radio, and said to Flandry: "Now can you tell me just what fetched that Terran spaceship here?"

"Why, to inquire more closely about the reported death of me, a Terran citizen, on Altai," grinned Flandry. "At least, if he is not a moron, that is what the captain will tell Oleg. And he will let Oleg convince him it was all a deplorable accident, and he'll take off again."

Toghrul stared, then broke into buffalo laughter. Flandry chimed in. For a while the Gur-Khan of the Mangu Tuman and the field agent of the Imperial Terrestrial Naval Intelligence Corps danced around the kibitka singing about the flowers that bloom in the spring.

Presently Flandry left. There wasn't going to be much sleep for anyone in the next few days. Tonight, though—He rapped eagerly on his own yurt. Silence answered him, the wind and a distant sad mewling of the herds. He scowled and opened the door.

A note lay on his bunk. *My beloved, the alarm signals have blown. Toghrul gave me weapons and a new varyak. My father taught me to ride and shoot as well as any man. It is only fitting that the last of Clan Tumurji go with the warriors.*

Flandry stared at the scrawl for a long while. Finally, "Oh, hell and tiddlywinks," he said, and undressed and went to bed.

When he woke in the morning, his cart was under way. He emerged to find the whole encampment grinding across the steppe. Toghrul stood to one side, taking a navigational sight on the rings. He greeted

Flandry with a gruff: "We should be in our own assigned position tomorrow." A messenger dashed up, something needed the chief's attention, one of the endless emergencies of so big a group on the move. Flandry found himself alone.

By now he had learned not to offer his own unskilled assistance. He spent the day composing scurrilous limericks about the superiors who had assigned him to this mission. The trek continued noisily through the dark. Next morning there was drifted snow to clear before camp could be made. Flandry discovered that he was at least able to wield a snow shovel. Soon he wished he weren't.

By noon the ordu was settled; not in the compact standardized laagers which offered maximum safety, but straggling over kilometers in a line which brought mutinous grumbling. Toghrul roared down all protest and went back to his kikitka to crouch over the radio. After some hours he summoned Flandry.

"Ship departing," he said. "We've just picked up a routine broadcast warning aircraft from the spaceport area." He frowned. "Can we carry out all our maneuvers while we're still in daylight?"

"It doesn't matter," said

Flandry. "Our initial pattern is already set up. Once he spots that from space—and he's pretty sure to, because it's routine to look as long and hard as possible at any doubtful planet—the skipper will hand around out there."

His gray eyes went to a map on the desk before him. The positions of all Tebtengri units had now been radio confirmed. As marked by Toghrul, the ordus lay in a heavy east-and-west line, 500 kilometers long across the winter-white steppe. The more mobile varyak divisions sprawled their bunches to form lines slanting past either end of the stationary one, meeting in the north. He stroked his mustache and waited.

"Spaceship cleared for take-off. Stand by. Rise, spaceship!"

As the relayed voice trickled weakly from the receiver, Flandry snatched up a pencil and drew another figure under Toghrul's gaze. "This is the next formation," he said. "Might as well start it now, I think; the ship will have seen the present one in a few minutes."

The Gur-Khan bent over the microphone and rapped: "Varyak divisions of Clans Munlik, Fyodor, Kubilai, Tuli, at-

tention! Drive straight west for 100 kilometers. Belgutai, Bagdarin, Chagatai, Kassar, due east for 100 kilometers. Gleb, Jahangir—"

Flandry rolled his pencil in tightened fingers. As the reports came in, over an endless hour, he marked where each unit had halted. The whole device began to look pathetically crude.

"I have been thinking," said Toghrul after a period of prolonged silence.

"Nasty habit," said Flandry. "Hard to break. Try cold baths and long walks."

"What if Oleg finds out about this?"

"He's pretty sure to discover something is going on. His air scouts will pick up bits of our messages. But only bits, since these are short-range transmissions. I'm depending on our own air cover to keep the enemy from getting too good a look at what we're up to. All Oleg will know is, we're maneuvering around on a large scale." Flandry shrugged. "It would seem most logical to me, if I were him, that the Tebtengri were practicing formations against the day he attacks."

"Which is not far off." Toghrul drummed the desk top.

Flandry drew a figure on

his paper. "This one next," he said.

"Yes." Toghrul gave the orders. Afterward: "We can continue through dark, you know. Light bonfires. Send airboats loaded with fuel to the varyak men, so they can do the same."

"That would be well."

"Of course," frowned the chief, "it will consume an unholy amount of fuel. More than we can spare."

"Don't worry about that," said Flandry. "Before the shortage gets acute, your people will be safe, their needs supplied from outside—or they'll be dead, which is still more economical."

The night wore on. Now and then Flandry dozed. He paid scant heed to the sunrise; he had only half completed his job. Sometime later a warrior was shown in. "From Juchi Shaman," he reported, with a clumsy salute. "Airscouts watching the Ozero Rurik area report massing of troops, outrider columns moving northward."

Toghrul smote the desk with one big fist. "Already?" he said.

"It'll take them a few days to get their big push this far," said Flandry, though his guts felt cold at the news. "Longer,

if we harry them from the air. All I need is one more day, I think."

"But when can we expect help?" said Toghrul.

"Not for another three or four weeks at the very least," said Flandry. "Word has to reach Catawrayayannis Base, its commandant has to patch together a task force which has to get here. Allow a month, plus or minus. Can we retreat that long, holding the enemy off without undue losses to ourselves?"

"We had better," said Toghrul, "or we are done."

Captain Flandry laid the rifle stock to his shoulder. Its plastic felt smooth and uncold, as nearly as his numbed cheek could feel anything. The chill of the metal parts, which would skin any fingers that touched them, bit through his gloves.

Hard to gauge distances in this red half-light, across this whining scud of snow. Hard to guess windage; even trajectories were baffling, on this miserable three-quarter-gee planet . . . He decided the opposition wasn't close enough yet, and lowered his gun.

Beside him, crouched in the same lee of a snowbank, the Dweller turned dark eyes upon the man. "I go now?" he ask-

ed. His Altaian was even worse than Flandry's, though Juchi himself had been surprised to learn that any of the Ice Folk knew the human tongue.

"I told you, no." Flandry's own accent was thickened by the frostbitten puffiness of his lips. "You must cross a hundred meters of open ground to reach those trees. Running, you would be seen and shot before going half way. Unless we can arrange a distraction—"

He peered again through the murk. Krasna had almost vanished from these polar lands for the winter, but was still not far below the horizon. There were still hours when a surly gleam in the south gave men enough light to see a little distance.

The attacking platoon was so close now that Flandry could make out blurred individuals, outlined against the great vague lake. He could see that they rode a sort of modified varyaks, with runners and low-powered negagrav thrust to drive them across the permasnow. It was sheer ill luck that he and his squad had blundered into them. But the past month, or however long, had been that sort of time. Juchi had withdrawn all his people into the depths of

the Ice Lands, to live off a few kine slaughtered and frozen while their herds wandered the steppes under slight guard . . . while a front line of Tengri and Dwellers fought a guerrilla war to slow Oleg Khan's advance. . . . Skulk, shoot, run, hide, bolt your food, snatch a nap in a sleeping bag as dank as yourself, and go forth to skulk again. . . .

Now the rest of Flandry's party lay dead by Tengri Nor. And he himself, with this one companion, was trapped by a pursuit moving faster on machine than he could afoot.

He gauged his range afresh. Perhaps. He got his sights on a man in the lead and jerked his head at the Dweller, who slipped from him. Then he fired.

The southerner jerked in the saddle, caught at his belly, and slid slowly to the ground. Even in this glum light, his blood was a red shout on the snow. Through the wind, Flandry heard the others yell. They swept into motion, dispersing. He followed them with his sights, aimed at another, squeezed trigger again. A miss. This wasn't enough. He had to furnish a few seconds' diversion, so the Dweller could reach those crystalline trees at his back.

Flandry thumbed his rifle

to automatic fire. He popped up, shooting, and called: "My grandmother can lick your grandmother!"

Diving, he sensed more than heard the lead storm that went where he had been. Energy bolts crashed through the air overhead, came down again and sizzled in the snow. He breathed hot steam. Surely that damned Dweller had gotten to the woods now! He fired, blind as the inward-rushing enemy. *Come on, someone, pull me out of this mess!—What use is it, anyhow? The little guy babbled about calling through the roots, letting all the forest know—*Through gun-thunder, Flandry heard the first high ringing noise. He raised his eyes in time to see the medusae attack.

They swarmed from above, hundreds upon hundreds, their tentacles full of minor lightning. Some were hit, burst into hydrogen flame, and sought men to burn even as they died. Others snatched warriors from the saddle, lifted them, and dropped them in the mortally cold waters of Tengri Nor. Most went efficiently about a task of electrocution. Flandry had not quite understood what happened before he saw the retreat be-

gin. By the time he had climbed erect, it was a rout.

"Holy hopping hexaflexagons," he mumbled in awe. "Now why can't I do that stunt?"

The Dweller returned, small, furry, rubbery, an unimpressive goblin who said with shyness: "Not enough medusa for do this often. Your friends come. We wait."

"Huh? Oh . . . you mean a rescue party. Yeh, I suppose some of our units would have seen that flock arrive here and will come to investigate." Flandry stamped his feet, trying to force circulation back. "Nice haul," he said, looking over strewn weapons and vehicles. "I think we got revenge for our squad."

"Dead man just as dead on any side of fight," reproached the Dweller.

Flandry grimaced. "Don't remind me."

He heard the whirr of tow motors. The ski patrol which came around the woods was bigger than he had expected. He recognized Arghun and Bourtai at its head. It came to him, with a shock, that he hadn't spoken to either one, except to say hello-goodbye, since the campaign began. Too busy. That was the trouble with war. Leave out the toil, discipline, discomfort, scant

sleep, lousy food, monotony, and combat, and war would be a fine institution.

He strolled to meet the newcomers, as debonairly as possible for a man without cigarettes. "Hi," he said.

"Dominic . . . it was you—" Bourtai seized his hands. "You might have been killed!" she gasped.

"Occupational hazard," said Flandry. "I thought you were in charge of our western division, Arghun."

"No more fighting there," said the noyon. "I am going about gathering our troops."

"What?"

"Have you not heard?" The frank eyes widened. Arghun stood for a moment in the snow, gaping. Then a grin cracked his frozen mustache, he slapped Flandry's back and shouted: "The Terrans have arrived!"

"Huh?" Flandry felt stunned. The blow he had taken—Arghun owned a hefty set of muscles—wait, *what* had he said?

"Yesterday," chattered the Altaian. "I suppose your portable radio didn't pick up the news, nor anyone in that company you were fighting. Reception is poor in this area. Or maybe they were fanatics. There are some, whom we'll

have to dispose of. But that should not be difficult."

He brought himself under control and went on more calmly: "A task force appeared and demanded the surrender of all Yesukai forces as being Merseian clients. The commander at Ulan Baligh yielded without a fight—what could he have done? Oleg Khan tried to rally his men at the front . . . oh, you should have been listening, the ether was lively last night! . . . but a couple of Terran spaceships flew up and dropped a demonstration bomb squarely on his headquarters. That was the end of that. The tribesmen of the Khanate are already disengaging and streaming south. Juchi Shaman has a call from the Terran admiral at Ulan Baligh, to come advise him what to do next—oh, yes, and bring you along—"

Flandry closed his eyes. He swayed on his feet, so that Bourtai caught him in her arms and cried, "What is it, my dear one?"

"Brandy," he whispered. "Tobacco. India tea. Shrimp mayonnaise, with a bottle of gray Riesling on the side. Air conditioning. . . ." He shook himself. "Sorry. My mind wandered."

He scarcely saw how her lip trembled. Arghun did, gave

the Terran a defiant look, and caught the girl's hand in his own. She clung to that like a lost child.

This time Flandry did notice. His mouth twitched upward. "Bless you, my children," he murmured.

"What?" Arghun snapped it in an anger half bewilderment.

"When you get as old and battered as I," said Flandry, "you will realize that no one dies of a broken heart. In fact, it heals with disgusting speed. If you want to name your first-born Dominic, I will be happy to mail a silver spoon, suitably engraved."

"But—" stammered Bourtai. "But—" She gave up and held Arghun's hand more tightly.

The noyon's face burned with blood. He said hastily, seeking impersonal things: "Now will you explain your actions, Terra man?"

"Hm?" Flandry blinked. "Oh. Oh, yes. To be sure."

He started walking. The other two kept pace, along the thin blue Lake of Ghosts, under a lacework of icy leaves. The red halfday smoldered toward night. Flandry spoke, with laughter reborn in his voice:

"Our problem was to send a

secret message. The most secret possible would, of course, be one which nobody recognized as a message. For instance, Mayday painted on the Prophet's Tower. It looked like gibberish, pure spiteful mischief . . . but all the city could see it. They'd talk. How they'd talk! Even if no Betelgeuseans happened to be at Ulan Baligh just then, there would soon be some, who would certainly hear news so sensational, no matter how closely they were guarded. And the Betelgeuseans in turn would carry the yarn home with them—where the Terrans connected with the Embassy would hear it. And the Terrans would understand!

"You see, Mayday is a very ancient code call on my planet. It means, simply, *Help me.*"

"Oh!" exclaimed Bourtai.

"Oh-ho," said Arghun. He slapped his thigh and his own laughter barked forth. "Yes, I see it now! Thanks, friends, for a joke to tell my grandchildren!"

"A classic," agreed Flandry with his normal modesty. "My

corps was bound to send a ship to investigate. Knowing little or nothing, its men would be alert and wary. Oleg's tale of my accidental death, or whatever he told them, would be obvious seafood in view of that first message; but I figured I could trust them to keep their mouths shut, pretend to be taken in by him, until they could learn more. The problem now was, how to inform them exactly what the situation was—without Oleg knowing.

"Of course, you can guess how that was done: by maneuvering the whole Tebtengri Shamanate across the plain, to form Terran letters visible through a telescope. It could only be a short, simple note; but it served."

He filled his lungs with the keen air. Through all his weariness, the magnificence of being alive flowed up into him. He grinned and added, half to himself: "Those were probably the first secret messages ever sent in an alphabet ranging from one to five hundred kilometers tall."

THE END



Here is a chilling narrative in the best old traditions of science fiction, but with a chilling new protagonist:

THE CLONE

By THEODORE L. THOMAS

clone, n. a Biol. The aggregate of individual organisms descended by asexual reproduction from a single sexually produced individual; . . . Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Ed.

UNKNOWN loomed the lovely city, gleaming softly in the dusk. The breezes drifted in from Lake Michigan, soaking up the heat of the day. Deep beneath the streets the cables hummed and the wires sang and the pipes gurgled. Here were the nerve fibers and the ducts of the city. And it was in the ducts that the Clone began to grow. Beneath every great city there flows streams of water rich in nutrients and minerals, and containing ample energy to

supply the driving force for almost every conceivable chemical reaction. There are ground-up foods of all kinds, and soaps and detergents aplenty, and discarded medicines, spices, flavoring, colorings, inks, ointments, and cosmetics. The turbulent waters carry the astonishingly varied complex of chemical compounds that is the waste matter of any great city.

Buried under a busy intersection was a concrete collector box. Halfway up one side of the great box was a casting fault where an air bubble had become entrapped during the pouring of the concrete. In the course of time the thin shell of concrete separating the fault from the interior of the box had eroded away, leaving a cubic foot of shel-

tered area nestled in the wall. Here was the Pool, rock-hard womb for the Clone, kept warm by a high pressure steam line that passed near the exterior of the box.

The efforts of three widely separated people precipitated what happened next. A bus boy scraped into the disposal unit of a restaurant a large volume of meat and vegetable scraps. In another building a late-working plumber poured into a drain his left-over muriatic acid. Two blocks away a scrubwoman dumped into a set tub the remnants of her floor-cleaning solution. All the materials coursed down through the pipes, and all entered the great collector box at the same time. A few seconds of swirling, an odd eddy, and the already rich waters of the Pool received a heavy charge of the mixture.

The Pool seethed with the stuff of life. The warm water approximated the "hot thin soup" that existed in the primordial oceans when the Earth was very young, but with some differences. The Pool waters contained materials already partially synthesized, and in greater concentration and variety. The chemical reactions started, and side by side, two microcosmic specks began to grow.

In the hours that followed, the two specks grew into chromosomal chains encased in protoplasmic sheathing. The moment came when a minute thermal current in the Pool pushed the tiny flecks together; they blended and fused to become one. In that instant the Clone came into being. The time was 9:01 P. M.

The little cell divided, and then divided again. Daughter cells produced daughter cells in rapid succession, and by 12:48 A. M. the Pool was filled with nervous tissues. Differentiation began. Out over the lips of the Pool spread a quarter-inch-thick film of muscle tissue, creeping along the interior of the collector box. The fast-spreading film of tissue contained a network of tiny channels. Through the channels flowed a thin ichor containing a high concentration of two nameless enzymes. By 3:22 A. M. the collector box contained a complete lining of living tissue. The Clone entered the pipes that opened into the box and continued its growth along the pipe walls, growing with equal speed both upstream and downstream. Approximately 10 feet inside each pipe, at a joint, the Clone grew another mass of nervous

tissue. The nervous tissue grew in annular shape to conform with the shape of the pipe, and its growth in no way interfered with the rapid extension of the main body; the two kinds of tissue grew simultaneously. Thenceforth, at about every 50 feet of its length the Clone produced the patch of nervous tissue.

At 6:18 A. M. a portion of the Clone turned off into its first building on the upstream side of the collector box. It grew slower—that portion of it — since there were fewer nutrients present. The character of the nervous tissue deposited inside the building was slightly different; diminished food made it so. The higher the Clone rose, the less food it found, and the more ravenous it became. It was 7:55 A. M. when the Clone made its first contact with human beings, and the incident passed almost unnoticed by others.

Maude Wendal stood scraping the breakfast dishes down the sink, and it was this that brought the Clone up the soil pipe to the Wendal apartment. The circle of tissue was not at all obvious as it ringed the sink outlet from the underside. Sunlight flooded through the window above the sink, and for the first time the Clone felt the impact of the

energy in light. It was little enough, but it sufficed to activate the molecular structure of the muscular tissue. The film of tissue bulged out the opening, and the edges curved together to seal the drain. It was then that Maude Wendal saw it.

With a frown of annoyance she picked up the pot scraper and tried to push the greenish fluorescent mass out of the way. It resisted. Clicking her tongue in exasperation, she dropped the pot scraper. Then she prodded the mass with her finger.

Through the permeable cell walls flowed the enzyme-laden ichor. On contact with the proteinaceous matter of the finger the enzymes immediately broke down the existing protein and utilized the resulting amino acids to form the reversed-amide structure of the Clone itself. There was no sensation of pain in the finger, and it was several seconds before the woman realized that the finger had disappeared to be replaced by a different kind of matter. She screamed then, and lunged backward from the sink.

The Clone stretched as she pulled it away from the sink, and as it stretched, the linear polyamide structure of its body became oriented. The re-

sult was that the more the Clone stretched, the stronger it became. The woman was not able to move more than half a step back from the sink. The sudden halt jarred her, and it was a full second before she could adjust her eyesight to focus on her finger. The hand was gone, and the wrist, and part of the forearm. She screamed again.

Frank Wendal had been packing his sample kit, getting ready for another day of making calls. At his wife's first scream he straightened, shook his head and began to amble toward the kitchen. He came through the door at the second scream, and saw his wife pulling at what looked like a length of clothes line fastened to the bottom of the sink. "Oh for Pete's sakes," he said. He walked leisurely to her side and grasped the line with both hands.

He pulled on it, and tugged again, and then saw what was happening to his hands. Wide-eyed he looked at his wife. The Clone had taken the entire right arm and shoulder and part of the chest, and was about to engulf the head.

The human body structure contains approximately 60 percent by weight water. The structure of the Clone, on the

other hand, contained only about 40 percent by weight water. As the Clone converted the nitrogen-containing and the calcium-containing materials, it utilized only that amount of water necessary to maintain its own structure. It rejected the rest. Therefore the rapidly advancing line of demarcation that separated human tissue from Clone tissue was particularly marked by large droplets of water that ran together and then flowed to the floor down Clone and human alike.

Wendal saw the dripping line disappear into his wife's dress, and he saw the dress grow gradually wetter downwards. The right upper side of the torso took on an odd shapelessness, and the dress began to collapse in on itself. The head disappeared, and she fell over. He screamed. The Clone had reached his chest.

In the next apartment the Knapps looked at each other, the screams still ringing faintly in their ears. George Knapp shook his head and said, "I don't know why they do it. Fight, fight, fight, all the time fight. Why do they put up with each other?" Shaking his head he turned back to his morning paper.

Two minutes passed. The wet clothes of the man and

the woman lay on the floor of the Wendal apartment. The Clone rejected 36 pounds of water from the man, and 24 pounds from the woman, a total of 7.2 gallons of warm water. Too much to be absorbed by the clothes, the water spread out in a large puddle on the floor. The Clone took the nylon undergarments of the woman and the Dacron trousers of the man. It rejected the cotton dress of the woman and the cotton shirt and undergarments of the man. It took the shoes of both, and then there was nothing left to take. It briefly explored the polyethylene-containing wax on the floor, and the polyvinyl chloride floor tile before it swiftly withdrew to the drain. The time was 8:02 A. M.

In the buried pipes under the city, the Clone grew on. At intersections and distribution boxes it found more and more branches. It did not feed on the ample nutrients along the entire length of its body. Instead the bulk of its feeding was confined to those regions of its body which were actively engaged in growing; The static portions of its body took in relatively modest amounts of nutrition. There was, therefore, no shortage of nourishment even

when the Clone underlay a full ten city blocks. It grew on with as much vigor as ever.

At 8:57 A. M. the Clone made its second contact with human beings. This time it came out of the drain in a kitchen in a restaurant. Harry Schwartz, dishwasher, stared at the actinic-activated ball of matter fluorescing greenly in the bottom of the tub. He pushed at it with his polyurethane sponge, and saw the sponge disappear into the ball. He looked around at his sidekick, Joe Martz, and said, "Hey looka this. Damn thing ate my sponge."

"Huh?" Martz stepped to his side and looked into the tub. "Why dontcha clean yer tub?" And Martz leaned over and scooped up the ball with both hands. He pulled at it and was brought up short, so he pulled again, harder. He tugged and hauled and tried to break the thin line that held him.

"Look atcha," shouted Harry Schwartz. "It's eating your hands."

Martz held his hands up before his face, and saw that they were almost gone. The band of water was advancing fast. With a yell Martz threw his weight against the Clone,

and he began to run back and forth like a puppy at the end of a rope. The second cook and a bus boy and a waiter came over. Martz apparently was caught up in a sticky mass so they closed in to help him.

"Don't touch it," shouted Schwartz. "It'll eatcha."

Ignoring him, the three men grabbed the Clone and tried to pull it away from Martz. They knew immediately that they were caught, and the three men pulled with Martz to try to back away. But the Clone was growing rapidly, and it was able to pay off portions of its body so that no great strain was thrown on the rope-like section that stretched to the drain. The four men reeled across the kitchen to the far wall, and then they began to move along the wall. The Clone's body swept the kitchen, and caught the first cook and the pastry cook. Two waiters flung themselves onto the Clone and then began to struggle to get away. No one paid any attention to Schwartz, dancing around the edges of the struggle yelling, "Don't touchit. Don't touchit. It'll eatcha. Don't touchit."

The noise brought other people to the kitchen. The manager took one look, and

ran to telephone the police. The diners out in the dining room listened to the shouts and yells and crashes coming from the kitchen. They looked at each other nervously, and some left. Others went back to the kitchen to see what was happening that would cause so much chaos.

Water was everywhere. Martz's empty clothes were draped around a thick cylinder of greenly fluorescing material. Half consumed people lay in weird positions around the kitchen, some still struggling. Offshoots of the Clone rested on serving tables and counter tops where various foods had been, while water trickled off to the floor. It was then that the butcher entered the kitchen from the cold room. With horrified eyes he looked at the kitchen. From his position in a corner of the room two points seemed clear. All of the green matter was connected, and all of it seemed to stem from the dishwasher's tub. He stepped to the tub and was about to grasp the thin green line when Schwartz shouted to him from a corner, "Don't touchit. It'll eatcha."

The butcher stepped back and looked around. He picked up a meat cleaver and brought it down on the Clone where it passed over the edge of the

dishwasher's tub. The thin green line parted.

Cut off from the nervous tissue lying back down in the pipeline, the portion of the Clone in the kitchen lost its purposefulness. It could no longer retreat down the drain. It simply lay in the kitchen continuing its absorption of nitrogen- and calcium-containing materials.

The policeman entered in time to see the last remaining portions of several bodies turn into Clone tissue. Wide-eyed he listened to Schwartz describe what had happened. Then he bolted to a phone and gave his report to the desk sergeant in some detail. Sergeant Alton listened and asked some questions, and then arranged to send several squads to the restaurant. Then he thought a moment and called the pathology department of a nearby hospital. He described what had happened to the Chief Pathologist. It was fortunate that Sergeant Alton was an intelligent man, because the telephone call to the Chief Pathologist was one of the last telephone calls that could be placed in the city. The time was 9:52 A. M.

The Clone by now had made a series of appearances. It had come out of the pipes in 22

private apartments, 10 restaurants, 25 food stores, an early morning movie house, 3 department stores, and various smaller shops, all over an eighteen block area of the city. In the third grade room of a school an errant pupil surreptitiously poured his milk down the drain of the sink near the door. The Clone came to the drain and the pupil thrust his hand into it. In three minutes the water flooded the floor of the schoolroom and poured over the sill and flowed down the hall and cascaded down the stairs.

The police stations, the firehouses, and the newspaper offices were jammed with telephone calls. The disbelief of the men handling the calls ended when the Clone made its appearance there.

By 10:00 A. M. some people had fled to the streets, driven out by the sights seen inside the buildings. Not knowing where to go they grabbed passersby and begged them to come and help, to do something, to do anything. Many of the people in the streets went into the buildings and were caught by the Clone, or saw others caught by the Clone.

When the Clone rose into the hospital the Chief Pathologist was one of the first to

learn about it. In view of what he had learned from Sergeant Alton he immediately issued instructions over the hospital's public address system. "Leave it alone," he ordered. "Leave it alone, and stay away from all plumbing. It can kill you, so leave it alone. Report to this office whenever you see it. But don't go near it."

Trained in the handling of emergencies, and used to working near death, the entire hospital staff went about its duties as though two doctors, a nurse, and two orderlies were still alive instead of being in the form of approximately fifteen gallons of warm water on the floor of Operating Room Number 2. The Chief Pathologist gathered his staff about him and spoke briefly. He split his group into three teams, and each team went to a different site in the hospital where the Clone was. For the first time the Clone was subjected to the close scrutiny of scientifically trained personnel. The time was 10:10 A. M.

Panic raged in the heart of the city. The streets were choked with people; vehicles could not pass. The radio and television stations were by this time broadcasting warnings about this thing that

came out of the pipes. The Clone had entered all the broadcasting studios, and so the men doing the announcing had personal knowledge of that of which they spoke. Their emotion communicated itself to their listeners, and in the largest station of all, one of the announcers broke down on camera. The effect on the viewers was devastating.

Sound trucks manned by the police tried to bring order to the stampeding crowds, but it was no use. All the streets in the center of the city were filled with people trying to get away. In a strange community of consent, not a single person tried to use the subways. Some tried to carry with them a prized possession, a lamp, a strongbox, a set of china, a dress, only to drop it in the surging press of the crowds. It was worse for the children.

At 10:32 A. M. the mass of people had grown no thinner. The Clone now reached so far from the center of the city that it drove people out into the streets ahead of those in the center. Hot waves of panic spread in ever widening circles, nurtured by the announcements and ripened by the Clone itself. The disaster machinery of six states and the Federal Government slowly swung into action to care

for the stricken city, even with no clear knowledge of what had happened. One factor stood out. The panic-driven stampede had to be brought under control.

Helicopters swung low over the jammed city streets, and powerful speakers blared at the crazed people, urging them to stop running, telling them there was no danger in the streets. Again and again the messages boomed forth, but the tearing screaming crowd could not heed. The copters landed troops on the roofs, and they immediately headed for the streets. Some were caught by the Clone, some ran back to the roofs and cowered there, and some got to the streets where they were swallowed up by the raging crowds.

At 11:02 A. M. the Chief Pathologist worked his way to the roof of the hospital and succeeded in waving down a copter. The Pathologist had with him a cotton-stoppered bottle containing a small piece of living Clone. Talking over the radio with Army headquarters he explained all he had learned about the Clone: it was a living organism; it lived in the waste pipes under the city; it absorbed nitrogen-containing and calcium-con-

taining matter at fantastic rates of speed; and, most important of all, a solution of iodine in water killed it. Arrangements were made for the Chief Pathologist to fly to a university in another city. There a scientific group would be brought together to investigate the properties of the piece of Clone in the Pathologist's possession. The plan was put into immediate effect; the Pathologist climbed into the copter which then took off. Now the nature of the creature was known.

With all the people in the streets, nutrients no longer flowed through the waste pipes beneath the city. The Clone, grown to the outskirts, ceased growing further. It lay dormant, save for those parts which had been pulled out of the pipes by unwary victims. But those parts kept the panic alive. The hysteria in the center of the city grew worse as more and more people saw the Clone feeding inside the buildings. At one street corner, stalled autos filled the intersection, rendering it difficult for people to pass on foot. Swarms of people clawed their way over the tops of cars and buses; others fought to get ahead of them. The regions between cars began to fill with the hurt and the maimed, and

soon all the spaces between automobiles became jammed to car-top height with the bodies of those who fell. Throngs of people ran along the flesh and metal causeway.

Acts of heroism abounded. A groom, seeing what the Clone was doing to his bride and her father, nevertheless flung himself into the struggle and actually succeeded in parting the girl from the Clone. He lay sobbing over the half-wet white gown while the Clone, unnoticed, took him at the feet. An agile man, sprinting down the stairs past neighbors enmeshed in the Clone, stopped at the sight of a youth wonderingly watching the Clone climb up an arm. Seizing a chair the man fought to break the youth loose, but only succeeded in entangling himself. Father fought for son, brother for brother, and stranger for stranger. While most struggled blindly to save themselves, some men, some women, some children rose above the fearsome instinct for self-preservation and stayed to help another whenever it was possible.

Helicopters were everywhere, depositing soldiers on rooftops, carrying away helpless people who had sought refuge there, hovering low

over the streets to try to bring the crowds under control.

At 1:43 P. M. the first technical teams began to move back into the city. Moving slowly and carefully against the droves of fleeing people, they spread out through the suburbs and worked their way into buildings. Once inside, the men poured iodine solution into drains; the counterattack had started. But down deep in the pipes the Clone protected itself. It formed a thick wall of tissue, completely blocking the pipes, damming up the material so poisonous to it. The teams learned what was happening when—too soon—the pipes overflowed and would not take any more solution. The radio communications net hummed with query and answer, and it became apparent that the Clone would have to be dug out, foot by foot, mile by mile.

But the iodine attack was not without effect. Water had almost ceased to flow, the nutrients were gone. Many of the pipes were closed with the Clone's own flesh, so the Clone grew frantic from lack of food. It developed a new tactic.

Forming a ball at the mouth of any drain, the light-activated fluorescent matter flung

itself out into a long streamer. The streamer squirmed against floors and walls and furniture and fixtures. It sought nitrogen and calcium in the buildings in any amounts, however small.

The heavy crowds in the streets became drained of panic; numbness set in. For the first time the troops were able to direct intelligently the flow of traffic. In sodden silence the streams of people flowed from the city at a steady three miles per hour, heading for the safety of the countryside. It was then that buildings began to collapse.

Seeking the trace amounts of protein that occur in all wood, the Clone had penetrated floors and door frames. While it rejected the majority of the wood, it completely destroyed the structural strength of all wooden members. It followed the floors and frames into the studding, plates, and beams. Wooden buildings caved in, and the Clone explored the wreckage. It took many rugs and draperies. It took paints off the walls and adhesives out of joints. It reduced furniture to piles of shapeless splinters. Plaster, cement, and masonry were not immune. The calcium-seeking enzyme poured into walls, columns, and foun-

dations, taking up more calcium than it needed and depositing the excess in form of powdery calcium silicates. Buildings made of stone and cement began to fall apart, saved from complete collapse by the steel framework.

At first there was no response from those in the streets; they plodded onward ignoring the noise and the dust and the occasional structural member that rolled into their midst. Troops on rooftops were swallowed up as buildings gave way. The Clone pressed outward.

Thin films of it swarmed over the exterior walls of ruined buildings. Mounds of it formed at windows and cracks, and launched streamers out into the streets where the people were. At a thousand places at once the Clone suddenly got into the streets, and the panic this time was greater than before. Mindless people tried to climb sheer walls and fight their way through impassable wreckage.

Water wormed and flowed deep in the city streets. Cotton clothes floated in the water and plugged the storm sewers; the water level rose over the sidewalks and lapped against what was left of the buildings. Men splashed knee-

deep through the water in futile attempts to escape the Clone. Some fell exhausted and drowned.

At 3:35 P. M. the city was empty of life, save for the Clone. The water began to drain away from the low areas, leaving whitish salt deposits as it dried. The shining green tissue that was the Clone covered 200 square miles of what had been the lovely city.

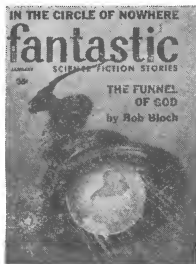
The city was dead, and there remained the task of killing the creature that had destroyed it. Armies of tech-

nical and military personnel began the long job of digging and spraying. In the ensuing months the many theories were advanced to explain the origin of the Clone. Among them was one that placed the blame for the creature on a series of accidents of chemistry. For beneath every great city there flow streams of water rich in nutrients and minerals, and containing ample energy to supply the driving force for almost every conceivable chemical reaction.

But no one listened.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH



The January issue of **FANTASTIC** features another trail-blazing, side-splitting, mind-creasing blast by **Bob Bloch**.

Titled *The Funnel of God*, it is a novelet about a young millionaire, an African magician, truth, love, hate, the human race—and the nature of God. By all odds, the story of the year not to be missed.

In addition, **FANTASTIC** for January features the macabre *In the Circle of Nowhere*, a time-fantasy by **Irving Cox, Jr.**, which has one of the most unusual heroes.

Plus—at least four other short stories, and all the usual features. Remember January FANTASTIC on sale at your newsdealer Dec. 17th.

THE MAN WHO WAS PALE

By
JACK
SHARKEY

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

She was just a sweet, kind-hearted old landlady who couldn't keep her nose out of other people's business. This was very unfortunate for Mr. Thebal.

MRS. Tibbets was a worrier. When it rained, she worried about people caught outside without umbrellas. When the sun shone, she worried about the corn crop that might need water. At band concerts, she worried about the deaf people who were missing the music. If it thundered, she worried for the hearing of people with good ears. No matter what happened, she found something to get worried about. As long as she was worried, she was content.

Her husband had been dead ten years when Mrs. Tibbets realized that she had a twelve-bedroom house for just herself alone, and began to worry about people who had no place to live. So she put an ad into the papers offering

her home as lodging for any who could afford the modest price she asked for the rooms (her husband had left her very little money, and this worried her, too).

After eleven of the rooms were filled—leaving the remaining room for herself—the price of the ad in the paper began to worry her, so she called and had it taken out. Then she settled herself comfortably in the living room, and, in her new role as landlady, began to worry about collecting the weekly rent.

The sun had just set, and Mrs. Tibbets had just turned on the lights in the living room—and begun to worry about the electric bill—when the door-chimes sounded.

"It could be a telegram with

bad news," thought Mrs. Tibbets, worrying herself toward the door. "Or the police are here to arrest one of the tenants. Or some desperate criminal has come here to murder us all. Or—"

At this juncture, she opened the door.

She found herself looking up into the sad-eyed, pale face of a man who stood at least six-feet-six inches tall, couldn't have weighed less than two hundred pounds, and was rather startlingly garbed in an ankle-length opera cloak with a flame-colored silk lining.

"I've come about a room," he said, in an enthralling baritone voice, with just the smallest hint of a foreign accent bending the syllables. "My name," he added, with a toothy smile, "is Thobal. Vandor Thobal."

Mrs. Tibbets found herself smiling back, despite the queer goosefleshy feeling she got all over when she saw the length and sharpness of his canines. There was a numbing sort of heat in his deep-set, burning eyes that made her feel rather weak and helpless.

"I'm afraid—" she said, and almost left those two words as her complete state-



ment, "—I'm afraid that I've rented all the rooms. I just had the ad taken out of the paper today."

"Surely you have something . . ." he insisted, coming inside her hall and closing the door behind him. He made no move to remove his cloak. "All I require is a place to sleep . . ."

"I'm so terribly sorry, but I—" Mrs. Tibbets began to worry about Mister Thobal, all at once. What if she turned him away, and he were found in the morning, huddled frozen in an alley somewhere. The fact that it was mid-July didn't stop her mental image of frosty death. Then she brightened. "Perhaps . . . I wouldn't show this to anybody, ordinarily, because it's really a terrible sort of place, but I *do* have a very small room. However, I should warn you: It's down in the cellar."

"Ah!" said Vandor Thobal, his eyes flashing scarlet. "Does it have mice? Cobwebs? Mold?"

Mrs. Tibbets sighed, and nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid it does."

"Wonderful!" said the pale man. "I'll take it."

"You will?" she said, with considerable surprise.

"Yes. I'm—I'm a sort of nature-lover. We're all broth-

ers, really. The cat, the bat, the rat, the spider, the maggot . . ."

"Well," said Mrs. Tibbets, with a sniff, "it'll be like Old Home Week for you in my cellar, then. It's this way," she said, leading him out into the kitchen.

She had to fumble with a ring of keys before she found the one that opened the stiff metal padlock on the cellar door. "Haven't been down here in months," she said with a little laugh, flicking on the lightswitch, and preceding him down the stairs. He followed wordlessly past the heaped cartons of odd bits of junk, past the furnace—unused during the summer months—and to a small room (really hardly more than a bin) at the rear of the cellar.

Mrs. Tibbets reddened in embarrassment as she opened the crooked door of plain, unsanded boards. "Used to be used for coal, before I had oil heat put in," she said, apologetically, hoping he wouldn't mind the crust of grime that covered the tiny cellar window near the top of the flaking brick wall. The place had a rather repulsive wet, yeasty smell to it.

Her new tenant, however, seemed very content. Almost

ecstatic. "And what is this?" he said, indicating a short flight of stairs just outside the door of his room.

"Oh, that leads to the backyard," said Mrs. Tibbets. "Hasn't been unlocked in years," she said, indicating the slope of the sturdy cellar doors at the head of the stone stairway.

"It will do nicely, thank you," said Vandor, rubbing his white hands briskly together. "Yes, it will be ideal. I shall move my things in to-night."

"Through there?" she asked. "I'm not even sure what I've done with the key . . ."

"Do not worry. I have a way with locks," he smiled.

That *smile*, she thought, it makes me all queasy inside.

"Well," she said, trying to brush off the mildewed folding cot in the corner of the room and raising a cloud of fleas from the damp dust on the mattress, "all right. It'll be ten dollars a week."

Vandor Thobal made a short, snappy bow, and clicked his heels slightly. "Of course," he said, reaching inside his cloak, and coming out with a crisp new bill. "This should take care of it for awhile."

Mrs. Tibbets adjusted her

glasses in the dim cellar and looked at the bill. "Five hundred dollars?" she said, with a little squeak in her voice. "Why, that's almost a year's rent!"

"Am I to understand there is a limit to my stay?" asked Vandor.

"Why, no," she said, quickly. "It's just that—I mean—Nobody gives a year's— No, of course not. No limit at all. Stay as long as you like."

A little giddy at her good fortune, she rushed upstairs, and had automatically almost locked the cellar door when she remembered that her new tenant was still downstairs. "You don't have anything of value down there, do you?" she called, leaning over the stairs from the kitchen door. "I mean, you have no way of locking your room . . ."

There was no answer.

"Mister Thobal?" she called, a little less heartily.

Still no answer.

Finally, cautiously, she made her way back down to the tiny room at the back of the cellar. It was empty.

"Mister Tho-bal!" she sing-songed, peering around in the semi-gloom of the shadowy cellar. She went to the short flight of stone stairs and looked up at the slanting cellar doors. Hesitantly, she reached

up a hand toward them and gave a tiny shove.

The doors flew outward with a loud slamming noise, and she gasped and drew back. Vandor was standing there above her, silhouetted against the night sky, his eyes glowing redly and nostrils flaring as he saw her there. He was carrying a large, ugly wooden box in his arms.

"Oh!" she said. "Is that your luggage?"

". . . Yes. My—er—trunk," he said, starting slowly downstairs, with his burden, nearly as wide as the stone steps. Mrs. Tibbets stepped aside to let him pass, and as he did so, entering through the door to his room, a tiny trickle of dirt sprinkled on the floor from under the edge of the box's lid.

"Goodness gracious!" she said, following him into his room curiously, "Whatever have you got in there? It seems so odd."

Vandor set the box against the cellar wall and turned to her, his face white and angry. "Madam, that is my own personal business, if you don't mind!"

Mrs. Tibbets shrugged. "Well, I just saw a dribble of dirt coming out of it, and

thought perhaps I could sweep it out for you—"

Vandor's face went—if anything—whiter. "No!" he roared, in an almost terrified voice. "I—I mean, that won't be necessary. 'It's *supposed* to be full of earth. I—I'm a sort of—of botanist. I grow things."

"Hmmpf," Mrs. Tibbets sniffed. "You won't be able to grow anything but mushrooms, down here!"

"That's just what I *do* grow," he said, with a smile of relief, bringing his long pointed canines into view. "Horticulture . . . Nothing like it."

"I s'pose not," said his landlady, starting out of his room. "I'll come down tomorrow and kind of straighten things up a little for you, while you're at work. The place certainly needs it."

"No!" he said, adding hastily. "I work *nights*. I usually sleep during the day."

"Oh, then I wouldn't want to disturb your sleep," said Mrs. Tibbets, at the foot of the stairs. "I'll wait until you go to work, and *then* I'll—"

"Please!" Vandor approached her, his hands spread wide in supplication. "I like everything *just as it is!*"

"Well, it's your room . . ." she sighed, starting upstairs.

"If there's anything I can do—"

"There is something," said Vandor. "Will you please replace the padlock on the door in your kitchen? I'll be using the cellar door, if you don't mind, as a sort of private entrance . . ."

Mrs. Tibbets hesitated, then thought of the five hundred dollar advance, and smiled. "Certainly. Do as you like, Mister Thobal. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," said Vandor.

"Oh," she said, at the top of the stairs, "did I tell you that you have kitchen privileges? Perhaps I should leave the padlock off the door just in case . . ."

"I never *eat*—at the place I live," he said. "I usually *dine out*. Thank you just the same."

"Very well," she said a little tartly, and exited to the kitchen and re-padlocked the door. She was just snapping the padlock shut when Mrs. Leonetti entered the kitchen.

"Something is the matter, Meesus Teebuts?" asked her roomer, setting a bag of groceries on the table.

"Oh, just a new roomer," smiled Mrs. Tibbets. "I'm worried about him. He looks so sickly. I wonder if I should have rented him that room.

Liable to catch his death of pneumonia."

"Pah. Always you worry too much," said Mrs. Leonetti. "If it's not the one thing, it's the other."

"But the cellar . . ." said Mrs. Tibbets, with a little shiver. "It's so *damp*."

"He's-a live in the *cellar*?"

"He— He seemed to *prefer* it."

Mrs. Leonetti shrugged, and began putting away her purchases in the refrigerator. "Well, if he likes, he likes. I'm-a have an uncle once, he likes to live in the attic and fly kites from-a the window."

"It takes all kinds, I guess," said Mrs. Tibbets.

"Sure it does," said Mrs. Leonetti, dismissing the subject. "Say, I'm-a gonna make a big pot spaggett'. Maybe you can-a bring him a plate. Warm him up good."

"That's a wonderful idea!" said Mrs. Tibbets. "But—" her face fell. "He'll probably be going to work. He works nights."

Mrs. Leonetti shrugged. "Is okay. I cook fast. If he's-a there when you go down, you give him. If he's-a *no* there, you eat yourself. Okay?"

"A fine idea," Mrs. Tibbets smiled.

An hour later, Mrs. Tibbets

tiptoed down into the cellar, with a steaming covered dish in her hands. She knocked on the door of Vandor's room, but there was no response.

"Oh, I've missed him," she complained aloud. "But maybe he's just stepped out for cigarettes or something. I can leave it for him."

She set the dish on the closed lid of the wooden box, and went back into the cellar proper, searching in the heaped cartons until she found a blank sheet of paper.

"Dear Mister Thobal," she scribbled, "if this has gotten cold when you return, feel free to use the stove to heat it up. Mrs. Leonetti, one of your fellow roomers, made it. It's really quite good, if you like Italian food. It's got a bit too much *garlic* in it for my taste."

Smiling, she signed the note, and went back upstairs.

She was awakened just before dawn by a hand upon her shoulder, shaking her violently. She sat up in bed, very startled, and flicked on the bedside lamp.

"Mister Thobal!" she said in horror, drawing the bedclothes about her, "How *dare* you come into a lady's *bedroom* at—" she consulted her alarm clock "—at four in the morning, and—"

"Mrs. Tibbets!" he interrupted in an anguished voice that went straight to her woman's heart, "would you *kindly* come down to my room and remove that *garlic*-stinking thing from my *cof*—my horticulture box?"

"At four in the morning?" she said, testily.

"Look—" he said, quivering with some emotion she could not fathom, "Dawn will be breaking soon, and I'd *like* to be asleep when it does. I can't sleep at all once it's bright out."

"Well," she said, slipping into her flannel robe despite her misgivings, "can't you remove it yourself?"

"No—" he said, miserably, "I'm *allergic* to garlic. I appreciate the thought, but would you please remove that plate from my room. The very redolence of that odor, even when you've taken it away, will make me ill for the rest of the day. *Please* hurry!"

"Oh, *all* right, *all* right," she said, huffily, leading the way downstairs, with Vandor Thobal looming after her like an ominous black cloud.

"Well, I hope you're happier now," she said, holding the plate in her hands as she stood outside the door of Vandor's tiny room. "If the smell is going to bother you, I can

bring you down a bottle of Airwick—"

"No, please," he protested, his white face tinged with greenish gray. "You've done enough already. Just—" he darted an anxious glance behind him, where the grimy windowpane was beginning to glow pink, "Just go upstairs and padlock the door. I've got to get to *sleep!*"

"Maybe if I brought you some flowers—" she began.

"No!" he wailed. "No Airwick, no flowers, *nothing!* I'll be getting along fine, if you'll just leave!"

"Well . . . If you're sure—" she said.

"Positive!" he said, though his voice sounded oddly weak. There was a reddish glow in the room from the tiny window. "Now . . . please . . . go . . ." His voice faded.

"All right," she smiled, closing the door. "Pleasant dreams."

The only answer was a scuffling of feet and a muffled slamming sound. Mrs. Tibbets cocked her head, shrugged, and went back upstairs.

She was worried about her new roomer.

Two weeks later, she was still worried. She felt it was her responsibility, in a way,

to keep him healthy. After all, if he got sick, might not the local authorities protest her renting out such a damp, germ-breeding place?

She was too worried to even share in Mrs. Leonetti's misgivings about the mysterious attacks in the neighborhood. Mrs. Leonetti was afraid to go out at night, what with the mounting number of men and women found pale-faced and incoherent in their beds in the mornings, though now and then they'd be found up on the grass in the park, or slumped in a doorway on the main street. The police were calling them "attacks" because the word was ambiguous enough to refer either to a malefactor of some sort or just a poor state of the victims' health.

It was Mrs. Tibbets' opinion that it was just "something that was going 'round." She thought of it hardly at all, unless Mrs. Leonetti brought the topic up. Mostly, she was worried about Mister Thobal. Perhaps *he* was getting whatever was laying these others low. He certainly didn't *look* very healthy.

"Vitamin deficiency," said Mrs. Leonetti, in reply to a query of Mrs. Tibbets. "He's-a no got the right vitamins. I'm-a read in a medical story

in a magazine. It's-a called a vitamin deficiency."

"Don't see how I can help him, then," sighed Mrs. Tibbets. "No way to get vitamins to the man if he doesn't eat his meals here."

She brooded and worried about the state of her roomer's health until she could think of nothing else. She rarely saw him. Only the few times she went down into the cellar to "get something" she "needed" from one of the cartons did she see him. He never, after that first night, came into the upstairs part of the house at all.

"He could be sick, dead, or dying," she said to herself. "And I'd never find out until the five hundred dollars was used up. It's my *duty* to check on him."

So every so often, making some excuse or other, she'd go downstairs and rummage through the dusty cartons there, hoping for a glimpse of him, still alive. But he never came out of the room by day, and at nightfall, she wasn't quite up to facing him in the darkened cellar alone.

When an entire week had passed without her so much as catching a glimpse of him, she couldn't stand it any longer.

"I'll just peep into his

room, quietly, and see if he's all right," she said to herself.

But just to be on the safe side, she waited till almost sunset. "That way," she assured herself, "if I *do* waken him, it'll be about time for him to get up for work anyhow."

Being as silent as she could, she crept down into the cellar, and cautiously opened the door of his room. The cot was still folded, up against the wall.

"How strange," she said, entering the room. There was nothing there to show the room's occupancy except his wooden box against the far wall under the window.

"I wonder—" she said, half-aloud, "where he's gone to?"

At that moment, the sun went down, and the lid of the box opened up.

"Yipe!" said Mrs. Tibbets, as Vandor Thobal sat up in the box. His hands arrested themselves in the process of brushing the soil from his cloak.

"What are you doing in here!?" he demanded.

"What are *you* doing *there*?" she countered, folding her arms.

Vandor swallowed, then seemed to think of something. "The mushrooms," he

explained, rising to his awesome full height before her, the tiny clods of earth rolling off his cloak back into the box. "They— They need heat, you see. It's rather chilly here in the cellar at night, and so, I've taken to sleeping in there, hoping my body heat will suffice to help them grow."

"I never heard of such a thing!" said Mrs. Tibbets.

"Did you never hear of a chicken incubating an egg?" she said smoothly.

Mrs. Tibbets was taken aback at this. "Why— Yes, of course, but—"

"It's the same principle, really," he said, flashing his pointed teeth in a wide smile at her.

"Yes—" she said, with a funny cold feeling inside her. "Yes, I suppose it is."

Suddenly, without another word, she turned about and hurried upstairs. She couldn't get the padlock on the door fast enough to suit her.

"Whew!" she gasped, sinking into a kitchen chair. "I've never been so jittery in my life."

At the rear window of the kitchen, just over the cellar door, she heard something, a kind of beating, flapping sound, but when she turned to

look through the window, there was nothing there.

"Brrr." she shuddered. "Someone must be walking over my grave."

She began to make a pot of tea to warm herself up. She was having her second cup when the bright idea struck her.

"He'll be so grateful," she said, hurrying into the front hall to search through the junk in the closet there. She hadn't liked the look in his eyes when she'd last seen him. Perhaps he'd be so angry with her that he'd leave, and then she'd have to refund what remained of the five hundred dollars. This really gave her something to worry about.

"But," she half-sang to herself, taking out the box from the closet, "this will make him change his mind. *Anyone* would be grateful not to have to sleep in a dirty old box like that another night . . ."

"Hello!" she chirped, as Vandor opened the door to his room. "I got up early to surprise you."

"Mrs. Tibbets . . ." he said, closing the door behind him with an odd, intent stare, "for once, I am very glad to see you."

He approached her slowly, towering over her in his

enormous black cloak, his pallid hands reaching out toward her.

"You— You are?" she said, in a very small voice.

"Yes," he said, eyes and teeth glinting. "I had a rather . . . *unfruitful* . . . night's work. But now I feel that everything will soon be all right."

His gaze shifted from her eyes to her throat, and she suddenly felt chilly.

"Mister Thobal," she said quickly, "I have good news for you."

"You have?" he said, surprised into halting a few paces from her. "For me? You have news for me?"

"Yes," she said, with what she hoped was infectuous delight. "You won't have to

sleep in that dirty box anymore . . . Look!"

She turned to her left and, reaching out a hand, flicked a switch.

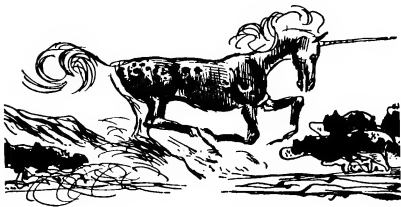
Instantly, reflecting from the inner walls and soil of the box, a bright, warm light came alive.

"It'll keep your mushrooms *much* warmer than *you* ever could!" she said, turning back to him. "It's a *sunlamp*!"

But, as she completed her turn, Vandor Thobal was not in evidence. His suit, cloak, and shoes were still there, however, sagging horribly into a viscous brown-and-green puddle on the floor of the room.

"Goodness!" said Mrs. Tibbets, leaping to her feet. "Now I *am* worried!"

THE END



I, GARDENER

By ALLEN KIM LANG

*Can the Great First Law fail?
Could the great Dr. Asim—
sorry, Ozoneff— have
been wrong?*

I HAD flown to Boston to sign Doctor Axel Ozoneff to a contract with my new fall television show, "Point of View." I'd already recruited a cadre of intellectual fuglemen, but I needed Dr. Ozoneff as my program's sergeant-major, as the catalyst who'd spark the seethings of his colleagues into the imaginative pyrotechnics that attract sponsors and build the big Trendex. Associate Professor of Cryptochemistry at the Medical School, author of thirty-three books (maybe more: it had been a week since I last counted), a writer whose byline appeared on the Contents page of a dozen magazines and journals regularly as their copyright notice, and a poet of considerable skill, Dr. Ozoneff was besides something of a television personality. Who but he could have invented an s-f vignette, live, on-camera, and have it subsequently published in a

major magazine and three anthologies?

I got out of the taxi at the foot of the hill. Ozoneff's home was at its summit, surrounded by a garden that threatened to pullulate into unproper Bostonian jungle at any moment. As I walked up the brick pathway toward the house, between flowering trees that hinted the presence of tigers, the gardener stepped out to block my way. He was dressed in earth-stained overalls and wore gloves; a dessicated man tall and lean as a mystery figure in a Navaho sand-painting. He held before him, like a twin-handled short-sword, a pair of hedge-shears. "Good morning," I said, sucking my belt-buckle back from the points of the clippers. "I have an appointment to see Dr. Ozoneff."

"Indeed?" The gardener raised his sharp chin and star-

ed at me like an entymologist inspecting an impudent bed-bug. "At what time had the master consented to see you, sir?"

I felt that the gardener's "sir" had a pejorative tone to it, pronounced the way it would be pronounced by an injured enlisted man speaking to his injuring officer. "Dr. Ozoneff will see me at ten o'clock," I said. "Put aside those clip-pers and let me pass. I shall certainly inform the doctor of your behavior."

He held me at bay with the shears. "I assure you, sir, that the master will neither see you nor hear ill of me," he said. "Be that as may, you're early. It is not yet nine-forty-five. I can't allow you to burst in on the master betimes. Perhaps you'll wait here in the garden?"

I glanced at my watch. He was right; I was early; the taxi-drive from Logan International Airport had taken less time than I'd budgeted. With the feeling I was humoring a madman's whim, I remarked, "This is a lovely spot. It will be a pleasure to spend fifteen minutes in the midst of such beauty."

The gardener stared at me as though gauging my sincerity; then he looked for a mo-

ment as though his leather face might bend into a smile. "Indeed, sir, I've been told by horticulturists of some note that I have the gift of the green thumb," he said. "It's a passion with me, this garden; and the master was himself most alive to the seduction of vegetable beauty. You should have visited us three days ago, sir. I had a band of fifty sacred lilies blooming all at once, those that flower only in the sabbatical year, standing like a field of obscene scarlet-tipped swords. For all their loveliness, I was told by our downwind neighbors, these lilies smelled like a ruptured cesspool. If it is true about their odor, such flowers make a forceful moral sermon, sir, do they not?"

"Do you have no sense of smell?" I asked him. "That would seem a considerable handicap to a gardener."

"I can drink in beauty with my eyes," he said; "and, since I cannot smell, the sting of the lilies' sermon missed me. Here . . ." he gripped my arm with fingers which, though gloved, were hard as forceps ". . . you can see the lemon-trees in bloom, a pleasing sight seldom come upon in these latitudes."

"They're under glass?" I asked.

"That's the wonder of it," he said. "They're under the open sky, sir." He led me to a line of bushes twice the height of a man, unpruned, pale-green of leaf, with reddish scion-leaves deep inside the foliage; sweet-smelling flowers, tinted a delicate purple on their underpetals.

Seeing them for the first time, I understood why the poet sang his dream of the land where they grow. "Lemon-trees, outdoors, in Massachusetts?" I asked. "They are a new species, no doubt."

"No, sir," the gardener said. "I admit it's not easy to persuade lemons to thrive through New England snow and gale; but thrive these do. Don't step any nearer them, sir, if you please. It is not healthy to be too intimate with these trees."

"I'm not allergic to citrus fruit," I said.

"I'll grant you that, sir, not knowing your personal idiosyncracies," he said; "but step no closer, or I'll be forced to restrain you."

Seeing that the man was at least a little mad, I stood quite still and stared at the trees. The leaves, as I said, were rather pale, not at all the lime-green of orange-leaves; but the bushes looked quite healthy, and breathed off a

thin and lovely fragrance. "Why do you consider your lemon-trees dangerous?" I asked.

"The hurt is in the fertilizer I use," the gardener said. "A little notion of my own, sir. About the roots of these lemon-trees, like baked bricks to warm one's feet in bed in winter, I've planted a few capsules of a stuff no man may touch and not scorch his fingers badly."

"Radioisotopes?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. When there is snow on the leaves, the roots of these trees bask in tropical soil and pump warm juice up to the winter branches," he said. "Now, sir, when I've stopped speaking, it will be just forty seconds before ten o'clock. If you've an appointment with the master, I dare not detain you. Walk up to the front door, open it, then go up the stairway. The master is in his study, the first room to your right at the top of the stairs." The gardener turned from me with an abrupt about-face, and marched over to a box hedge, to begin clipping at its green crewcut.

"Thank you," I said to his back. I retreated toward the door of the house, less apprehensive of radiation hazard from the lemons than of hedge-clipper hazard from the half-

mad gardener. I should have to caution Dr. Ozoneff about this fellow.

I entered the front door as I'd been instructed to, and hurried up the stairway that bent down into the hall. The upper landing was lined with bookshelves bearing volumes in six languages, many of them translations of my host's scientific and fictive works. I rapped on the first door to my right and paused for reply. There was none. There was no sound of Ozoneff's insatiable typewriter. "Doctor Ozoneff?" I demanded, loudly enough to be heard anywhere in the house. There was still no answer. Worried lest the gardener might have become alarmed at my rapping and my shouting, and come up the stairs after me with those shears of his, I turned the knob and entered Doctor Axel Ozoneff's study.

The study, like the landing, was lined with books. The man I'd come to see lay beside his silent typewriter. The blood pooled on his desk was just beginning to coagulate.

The flock of sated flies who'd been disturbed by my entrance lumbered heavy-bellied round my head, like a fleet of tankers. I flailed the carrion bugs away and stepped closer to the

corpse. Ozoneff's head had been cleaved almost from his body. Something had split his spine in a single giant bite. His forehead rested in a pool of blood, surrounded by the tiny browning footprints of the flies.

With the lucid calm of shock, I walked about the study, searching for the telephone. It was not here. I went back to the landing and explored the other rooms. The telephone was in the bedroom. I looked up the number I required, still as calm as though I were arranging for a caterer, and picked up the phone, careless of my responsibility as first-on-scene to preserve fingerprints. I dialed DE-von-shire 8-1212. The sergeant on duty at the Emergency and Central Complaint Bureau answered crisply. I heard his pencil scratch as he recorded my name and Dr. Ozoneff's address. "The killer is insane," I said. "Please hurry; I'm alone with a madman." I hung up and considered that word I'd used: Alone. Doctor Axel Ozoneff was only a few minutes dead, and already I'd ignored him in my census of those present. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

I stood up from the bed and turned toward the door. The gardener's bony figure block-

ed the bedroom's exit. He'd come up the stairs silent as a cat. He still held the hedge-shears. Staring at them, I saw reddish-brown stains near the hinge, where the blades were joined together. It might have been rust. "You called the police," the gardener said.

"Doctor Ozoneff is dead," I said.

"I know. It was I who killed him."

"Get away from me!" I shouted, retreating between the beds, my artificial calm broken.

He glanced down at the huge shears he held and lifted them. He slammed the blades together. "As easy as that," he said. "A man is such a tender poor thing."

I backed toward the window of the bedroom, vastly preferring an unexplored two-story drop to remaining in this room with the murderer. "I didn't mean to frighten you, sir," the gardener said. "I must admit you have reason to fear me: I am a monster. Now that I've breached the great First Law, what sinfulness might I not find in me, sir?" He let the hedge-shears fall to the carpet and stood quite still, like a mummy just unwrapped. "If I had tears, I'd blind me with them," he said. "If the Lesser Directive didn't hold my hand

where the Great Law failed to, I'd close my consciousness. I am seeking the strength to do so, sir."

"Why did you kill Dr. Ozoneff?" I asked, alert to keep the madman talking while the Boston police raced to capture him.

"I was imperfect," he said.

"The best of us is," I answered him. Permissive counseling.

"But with all your weakness," he said, "you have poetry and progeny and history. I have none of these, nor even the pitiful gift of the sense of smell. I am color-blind as well, sir. Do you know that the blood spilled by my master in the next room looks to me like so much ink? Black ink, sir. I have spilled a good deal of ink in this house."

"Why did you kill Dr. Ozoneff?" I insisted.

The gardener turned and walked from the room, leaving the hedge-shears on the floor. I followed, kicking the shears under one of the beds. He'd entered the study, and stood over the body of his employer. "I'd asked to be allowed to spend the day planting bougainvillaea and red jasmine in the center of the garden, near my lemon-trees," he said. "'Squamous epithelium!' the

master said—this was a favorite oath of his, sir! he said it was explosive enough to stir the swearer's viscera while not offending any hearer, however tender-eared—"Squamous epithelium! I can't let you spend all your time potting around in the garden. Get to work on that variable-star article; we've got a deadline." I was carrying the shears at the time, sir, just having come from the hedge. Something snapped within me, and I killed him."

I shuddered. When the lunatic quoted Dr. Ozoneff's last words, his voice aped that of the dead man. A horrid mimicry, from a murderer. "Do you insist that you killed Dr. Ozoneff because he wouldn't let you work in your garden?" I demanded.

"When he said those words," the gardener said, "I repeated the very first sin that ever was. I said to myself *non serviac*—I will not serve. The wall of the First Law was down; it was only a short step from that disobedient thought to my master's murder."

I was impatient for the police to arrive and truss up the gardener; I wouldn't be safe till they did. I feared he might stop talking and realize that I was the only witness to his

confession of murder. "What does your talk of ink and deadlines mean?" I asked. "Do you write, too?"

"The garden is only my life," the gardener said. "I was made to write."

"Perhaps I've read some of your work," I said, a phrase guaranteed to keep a writer talking.

"If you've read many of my master's works, you've read some of mine," the gardener said. "I wrote for him, with him; mysteries and science-fiction and textbooks and essays. He'd poured his brain into mine, you understand. When I put words to paper they were his words, though he might be sleeping when I wrote. The master had so much to say, sir, he couldn't say it all alone. What man, alone, could teach, could lecture, could carry on research in the arcana of rebellious cells; who could write *bruone* books a year, compose learned essays for the journals while he invented as many as *apdagbru* stories for the s-f press in *cidbru* short months?"

"Talk sense, man," I said, afraid of the deterioration presaged by this nonsense-word symptom of his mania. "*Bruone? Apdagbru? Cidbru?*"

"Forgive me, sir," the gar-

dener said. "In my distraction, I forgot. I think in the binary system, of course; and did not stop to translate into decimal when I spoke. Five books, I meant, and thirty-six stories in twelve short months."

"If I understand your motives correctly," I said, "you killed Dr. Ozoneff because he'd somehow forced you to write for him as a sort of slave-scribe. He stole your writing from you to publish it under his own name. Am I correct in assuming this?"

"Not at all, sir," the gardener said. "Can your right hand steal from your left? Can your liver cheat your spleen from its birthright?" He held his gloved hands toward me, palms-up. "These are his hands, sir. I am he. I am a mere extension of Dr. Axel Ozoneff's mind, a pseudopod of his intelligence. I am his creature, sir." He dropped his hands to his sides. "And I, his creature, killed him."

There were sirens sounding down the street. "You'll be taken care of," I told the gardener. "There are doctors who

understand your sickness, who will work to cure you."

"Can your doctors heal the positronic brain that lost its hold on the great First Law?" he asked me. "Can your psychiatrists console me for the fact that my creator created badly? Do you have robopsychologists to patch the chinks my maker left in my mental armor? No, human, you have not!" He stood glaring at me as the trio of sirens screamed toward the foot of the hill and stopped; as heavy footsteps rattled up the walk; as the front door slammed open.

"I believe," he said, "that I'll now be able to do what I must." He tugged the glove from his right hand. I saw the glint of steel as he balled a fist like a sledge-hammer. "The shame, to be the first of my kind, and a failure," he said. He hammered his fist down upon the apex of his skull. The roof of his head bent inward. There was a sputtering of sparks, and the gardener's eyes went dead. His arm dropped to his side. He was lifeless as his master at the desk.

THE END



THE PRICE OF EGGS

By
RANDALL
GARRETT

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

Royal babies were pretty important on Dynak, even if they did hatch out of eggs. So when Beccaccia di Vino mated with the Shannil, everyone held their breath. Especially di Vino. He might not have much more of it.

YOU'LL find things a lot different out here, Lieutenant," said Colonel Hastings as he eyed the newly-arrived officer in a manner which was intended to be detached, and which failed by a narrow margin to do quite that. He levelled his gaze.

Lieutenant Donald John Newhouse nodded his head just the slightest and said, "Yes, sir."

"I appreciate the fact that you have been specially traiped for this work," the colonel went on, "and I appreciate that Sector Headquarters must think very highly of you to send you out on something like this. But it is my own personal opinion that it takes more than theoretical work to understand the situation on an alien planet that one has

never visited. You've got to live with it."

"Yes, sir," said Lieutenant Newhouse again. There was little else he could say; there was no point in arguing with the colonel. He was well aware that Colonel Hastings was angry because he had been unable to solve the problem that was facing him here on Dynak, and because Sector Headquarters had sent in a new man to do it—and a fresh-faced junior officer, at that. Logically, the colonel should have been angry with himself, not with Newhouse, but man does not function by logic alone.

Colonel Hastings toyed with a pink paperweight with one hand and scratched his button nose with the other, while his eyes remained steadily on



For the royal couple the future did not look bright.

Newhouse. "I also appreciate the fact that you . . ."

Newhouse listened respectfully to what the colonel had to say, mentally making a note to the effect that Colonel Hastings, on his own word, was a very appreciative man. He seemed to appreciate everything.

". . . And I assure you that you will have every bit of data which we have so far obtained at your disposal."

He paused, and Newhouse, sensing that he should make some reply, said: "Thank you, sir; that will be very helpful."

The colonel sighed. "Very well. Don't hesitate to call on me for anything, Lieutenant. And—uh—" He paused suddenly looking wistful, like a kicked collie.

"Yes, sir?" said Newhouse respectfully.

"—uh—I trust you will keep me informed—ah—for my own information."

"As much as possible, sir," said Newhouse, trying hard not to feel sorry for the colonel.

"Very well," Colonel Hastings said morosely. "Unless there are any questions, you may go."

Newhouse detected the hopeful note in the other man's voice and responded. "I really don't think I can ask

any intelligent questions until I've studied the problem thoroughly, sir."

The colonel looked gratified. "Very well. I appreciate your concern, Lieutenant. Thank you."

"Thank you, sir," Lieutenant Newhouse said saluting. Then he turned on his heel and left the office.

He moseyed over to the broad swath of green park that had been left as a relaxation spot when the base had been built. It wasn't crowded; there were only two or three men sitting on the benches, smoking and talking quietly. Newhouse found a bench to himself and sat down to mull things over.

There was nothing totally new in the situation here on Dynak. Newhouse, as a trouble-shooter knew that, even if Colonel Hastings didn't. Dynak was one of the many worlds which Man had decided not to colonize in spite of its inviting appearance. The biochemistry of the plants and animals was just a little too different to be compatible with Man, which meant that the planet would have to be wiped clean and started over in order to provide a suitable environment for human beings. And, aside

from the fact that such a step would mean destroying millions of species that would better be preserved for study, it would mean the death of the several million humanoid natives of the planet—something that Man had no desire to be responsible for.

Dynak Base was not a military establishment; the Space Force as a whole used only a minor part of its energies for military purposes. Most of its activities were scientific in nature. Nonetheless, any base such as this had to be fortified to a certain extent. There were tribes of humanoids in the immediate vicinity which were, like all such cultural units at that stage of development, intensely hostile to anything strange. Right now, the majority of them were warily friendly with the Earthmen, but there was no way of knowing how long that uneasy peace might last. Meanwhile, they were doing useful work—bringing in samples of various types of fauna and flora for the labs to work on.

It all sounded fine so far, Newhouse thought grumpily. But the catch lay in the word "humanoid." Any reasonably intelligent race was classified as "humanoid" if they were erect, bifurcate animals—a definition which covered a

multitude of variations. Most of them you wouldn't want to meet alone in a dark alley, and if you did, it would be a toss-up as to which of you would be the most frightened. Oddly-colored skins, three-eyed faces, and other *outré* features were not at all uncommon among them.

Dynak was different. The humanoids were near human. The brown-yellow pigment in their skins wasn't melanin, and it was another pigment that gave them the intensely blue-violet eyes coloring; they had different kinds of glands inside, arranged differently; they were almost entirely hairless, except for soft patches of down on the top of the head; and they averaged about four feet seven in height. Not human, no. Definitely not *homo sapiens*.

But they certainly *looked* human. And, to top the whole thing off, the females were, to an Earthman's eyes, as pretty as little dolls. Except that dolls are normally not built so enticingly.

They weren't *all* beautiful, true, but there were enough beauties to tempt the weary Earthman. And those who weren't weary were even more tempted.

Their body chemistries were incompatible, of course; off-

spring from such a union were impossible. But the union itself was certainly possible.

Even so, there hadn't been too much trouble. For one thing, there were plenty of human women on Dynak Base; for another, the semi-savage tribes which occupied the territory around Dynak Base had a rather *laissez faire* attitude, and a female's over-friendliness, even with alien giants from the sky, wasn't frowned upon. And, for a third, the savage women usually didn't come up to the standards of a fastidious Earthman, as far as general cleanliness was concerned.

But the women of the semi-barbaric city-state of Oassi, a hundred miles to the north, were a different matter entirely. Newhouse had never actually seen any of the native females, but the trimensional, full color, motion recordings had been graphic enough.

Newhouse could understand perfectly well why Boccaccio di Vino had managed to get himself into the jam he was in.

A man in civilian clothing had been approaching the bench Newhouse was seated on, but the lieutenant didn't pay much attention until the man stopped by the bench

and said: "Lieutenant Newhouse?"

Newhouse started to rise. "Yes?"

"Sit down, Lieutenant," the other said, sitting down beside Newhouse. He was a lean, elderly man, with graying hair and a long-jawed, bony face that managed to show a strong sense of humor in spite of its saturnine construction. "I'm Bruce MacAuliffe; Colonel Hastings said you wanted to talk to me."

Newhouse swallowed. "Well, yes, sir; I did. But you didn't have to—"

MacAuliffe raised a hand. "That's all right. Hastings has his own way of doing things. There's no point in raising a fuss. And besides, I imagine you want to get things started. Something has to be done about di Vino."

MacAuliffe was the head of the Diplomatic Section on Dynak, and an outstanding expert on anthropology and xenology; Newhouse felt flattered that the man had taken the trouble to seek him out.

"Something has to be done, all right," Newhouse agreed, "but I'm not quite sure what at this point. In spite of the reports, I still don't have the whole picture."

MacAuliffe lifted a thin eye brow. "No? I thought my

reports were comprehensive enough." But there was a definite twinkle in his eyes.

Newhouse grinned. "Hastings thinks the job can't be done till I've spent six months here because it's impossible to learn from reports; you think I can hop off immediately and get di Vino out of this jam, because everything can be learned from reports. It's a rough life we lead."

The diplomat grinned back. "Just what is it you want to know, Lieutenant?"

Newhouse then scratched thoughtfully at the area just behind his right ear. "Details, mostly, I guess. You and di Vino and the others went to Oassi to square away the details of this contract with the local government, and di Vino managed to get himself married. All as plain as my Aunt Millie's face. But I don't quite get a picture of Boccaccio di Vino the man nor of the personalities of the women involved."

MacAuliffe said: "I see. Well, di Vino himself is a very personable young man; good conversationalist and a fine diplomat—for a young man. He shows promise of getting somewhere in the field."

"Won't this caper sort of put a black mark on his record?"

MacAuliffe rubbed his long, thin nose sadly. "I'm afraid it will, yes. Shame, too. Mr. di Vino acted with the impetuosity of youth, and it'll probably follow him well into his old age."

"By then," said Newhouse, "he'll be bragging about it."

"Probably. He's just the type, though, who's a push-over for a set-up like that; pretty faces and figures go to his head. He and the Shannil, for instance, were . . ."

Newhouse listened while MacAuliffe talked.

The cultural level of the city-state of Oassi was similar in many ways to that of Egypt in the fifteenth century B.C., or that of pre-classical Athens or Sparta. It differed strongly, however, in that it was essentially a matriarchy. Since the natives of Dynak were oviparous, the women were freed from the temporary disability that child-bearing brought to viviparous species. In the more savage tribes, the females suckled the young and cared for them from hatching until they were old enough to fend for themselves; in Oassi, however, most of the care of the young had been handed over to the males while the females ran the state. The fighters were of

both sexes, carefully segregated into male and female battalions, but the top officers were all females.

Dynak Base had been built well away from Oassi; one of the strict rules of Earth was that no indigenous culture should be subjugated or influenced any more than necessary. Before any contact was made, a study of the more savage tribes had to be made.

Nonetheless, rumors had come out of the jungle that a strange group of aliens had built a fortress near the banks of the Ngong River, and the people of Oassi were aware of the presence of the Earthmen long before any contact had been made by the Earthmen themselves.

Eventually, diplomatic relations between the Earthmen and the Oassi people had been established simply because the Oassi army had sent an expeditionary force to find out the intentions of the strangers. There had been no actual fighting; the female general in charge of the troops had decided that it would be futile to attack Dynak Base and had asked, instead, for a parley.

The upshot of the whole incident was a decision to send a diplomatic party to Oassi itself. And Boccaccio di Vino

had been a member of that party.

The trouble was that, at that time, di Vino and the others didn't know a great deal about the customs and mores of the Oassi. More exactly, di Vino didn't know that just holding hands with an Oassi girl was tantamount to a formal engagement. And di Vino hadn't just stopped with holding hands. After the party had been in the city sixty-three days, di Vino found himself legally married to Oanella, the daughter of the Shann and Shanni of Oassi, and heir to the throne. When the old Shanni died, Oanella would become Shanni, and di Vino, as her consort, would become Shann whether he liked it or not.

It might sound like a good position to be in, and, in a human society, it could have been just fine. But Oassi was not a human city, and di Vino wanted desperately to get out and go back to Dynak Base—even farther away, if possible.

Oassi had a pleasant little law regarding the crown princess and the Shanni. If no fertile eggs were laid within the first two hundred days of marriage, it was the duty of the royal personage to get herself another husband. But since

monogamy was strictly enforced, and since no one, not even the Shanni, could remarry while the spouse remained alive, the only way out for her highness was the obvious one. Consequently, Boccaccio di Vino had found himself facing death.

"The big trouble," said MacAuliffe, "is that the young Shannil seems to be actually proud of di Vino; her 'giant' is something for the lesser nobles to envy." His face darkened. "She'll probably miss him very much."

"We can't let them kill him," Newhouse said flatly.

"I hope not," MacAuliffe said, "but, outside of storming their city, I don't see how we can get him out of the citadel."

"I'll think of a way," Newhouse said grimly. "I'm going into the city with the next food convoy."

"Sometimes," said Master Sergeant Pemberton in a low voice, "I think this whole thing is a waste of time." He turned the wheel of the car a trifle to avoid a tree, then twisted it back to avoid another.

Newhouse stuck a cigarette in his mouth, fired it. "What? You mean, taking di Vino food? He might get pretty hungry."

"I didn't mean that, Lieutenant; I wouldn't want to let him starve. But driving in all this chow every so often, over a hundred miles of jungle, isn't my idea of an efficient way to run an outfit."

"What would you do, if it were your job to decide policy?" Newhouse asked, genuinely curious.

"Just what the colonel's doing now," Pemberton said. "I realize it's the only sensible way. But there are times when I wish we could just walk in there, pull out our guns, and tell them to hand him over or else."

"Sure," said Newhouse, "but who'd raise *gakgaks* for us then? You want to raise a whole herd and milk 'em yourself?"

"My mother didn't raise her little Willie to be a herdsman for alien critters," the sergeant said virtuously. "Besides, I wouldn't know how, and I'm not anxious to learn. Those things smell worse than a herd of sick hogs."

"Same thing I'd say," Newhouse agreed. "But Earth would scream so loud they could be heard in Messier 31 if their only supply of anti-cancer serum were to be cut off, or even reduced. And if you know of any way to get it except from *gakgak* milk,

a grateful galaxy will prostrate itself at your feet."

"I'd feel pretty silly if they did," said Pemberton, wrenching the wheel around to avoid another tree. "But it's a hell of a note that Dr. Chung had to find the stuff in *gakgak* milk at all. Why couldn't he have been sensible and found it in tree leaves or something? Then we wouldn't have to stay on good terms with a bunch of high-handed female dictators."

"No," said Newhouse, "probably not. But we'd probably have to stay on good terms with the savages around the base so they'd go out and gather leaves for us. What's the difference?"

"The difference," Pemberton said triumphantly, "is that we wouldn't have to worry about the care and feeding of our boy, di Vino."

"Um," said Newhouse, realizing when he'd been beaten.

Pemberton glanced in his rear view mirror. "They having trouble back there? No, I guess not; they just slowed down a little."

Newhouse swiveled his head around and peered at the second car, which was following them. Like their own, it floated a foot off the ground on its antigravs as it moved through

the jungle. It didn't seem to be having any trouble.

"There's another thing, Lieutenant," Pemberton said. "I don't like the idea of carrying a dame along. Not that she's any trouble, but she might get hurt. This isn't exactly the cornfields of Iowa, you know."

"I think Captain Smith can take care of herself," Newhouse said. "She's a pretty tough gal."

"I'd rather have her on my side than against me, that's for sure," the sergeant admitted, "but my protective instincts always rise when I see a woman out in the wilds like this. Even if she is an officer."

Newhouse started to answer, but there was a pounding on the roof of the car. Pemberton slowed, rolled down the window, stuck out his head, and said something in a language Newhouse didn't understand.

Ksitka, a hunter from one of the tribes near Dynak Base, jabbered something back in the same tongue. Pemberton pulled his head back in.

"He says he smells trouble. There's a group of those lizard-like carnivores up ahead—two or three, he says. We'll have to go around 'em; I don't want to get tangled up with those babies." He turned the

wheel, and the car angled to the right. "Can't go to the left," he explained. "There's a cliff there that we couldn't make."

For a long minute, he was silent. Then: "And that's another thing, Lieutenant; we have to keep these cars close to the ground. If we could fly 'em, we'd have been to Oassi hours ago. But no, just because we're not to reveal our strength to the natives, we have to go creeping along like snails. Why, when I . . ."

Newhouse folded his arms across his chest and closed his eyes. Sergeant Pemberton was a compulsive griper, but his droning voice made a nice lullaby.

When they hove into sight of the city gates of Oassi, Pemberton shook the lieutenant. "We're here, sir. Their scouts spotted us twenty miles back, and the guard of honor is lined up, waiting for us."

Newhouse shoved himself into a more upright position and looked out at the pygmy-sized natives lined up in gorgeous array, in brightly-colored kilts and feathers. They looked, Newhouse opined, like a cross between a regiment of Scottish Highlanders and a group of Zulu warriors in full battle array. Each man

had a longbow and a quiver of arrows slung across the back of his shoulders, and each was carrying a seven-foot, metal-tipped spear in his right hand.

"Very impressive," said Newhouse. "Okay, Sergeant; let's get our own show on the road."

Both men got out of the car and marched solemnly back to the second car. Ksitka slid off the top of the car and marched back with them, looking very proud and haughty in his resplendent Earth-designed uniform, which was even gaudier than those of the Oassi forces.

At the door of the rear car, they paused. Newhouse opened it, and all three bowed low as Captain Virginia Smith emerged.

She was not in uniform, as the other spacemen were; she wore an array of robes and jewels that would have looked pretentious at a British Coronation. She was a tall woman; a full six feet in height; broad in proportion, she was a thirty-six year old career officer who could look both commanding and matronly.

Ksitka, who had been carefully coached in his role, ran around behind her and lifted the train of her robes

so that they would not drag the ground. Then the four of them marched solemnly up to the honor guard, Newhouse and Pemberton in the lead, with Captain Smith and Ksitka trailing behind, leaving the cars in charge of the driver of the second vehicle.

The Oassi guard, trying very hard not to look impressed, closed ranks and marched to the city gates with them. Newhouse had already noticed the effect that had been produced, however. The Oassi could see that Virginia Smith was obviously a woman, and a very powerful one at that. Thus, she commanded a respect that mere males could not have hoped for.

At the gate, the procession was met by a trio of Oassi females whose dress, impressive though it was, couldn't even compare with that of Captain Smith. Even little Ksitka's uniform was flashier.

Ksitka himself was in absolute ecstasy, in spite of the fact that his face was as stony and expressionless as an Easter Island idol's. His tribe had been looked down on and sneered at by the city-dwellers since time immemorial. And now, he, Ksitka the Hunter, was superior to the Oassi. It was a good feeling, and Ksitka was revelling in it.

The three Oassi bowed low as the Earthmen approached, and one of them said: "Her Splendor, the Shanni, awaits you at the citadel. May I inquire as to the rank of our honored guest?"

Newhouse had studied the Oassi language, and, although his accent was a bit heavy, he was perfectly lucid. "This is Her Supremacy, the Captain," he said with dignity.

"*Kepteen?*" the Oassi woman repeated. "An exalted rank, no doubt."

"No doubt at all," Newhouse agreed rather ambiguously. "She has come to pay her respects to her sister, the Shanni."

That made Captain Smith's rank perfectly clear; as a "sister", she was obviously the equal of the Shanni.

"Come this way," the officer said. "Transportation has been provided. I am afraid, however, that we must apologize to Her Supremacy for the inadequacy of the sedan chair we provided; we were not prepared for the visit of so exalted a personage."

"I will speak to Her Supremacy," Newhouse said. He turned to Captain Smith. "They want to apologize because they haven't got a sedan chair fancy enough for you,"

he said in English. "They're really impressed."

"I thought that's what the gal said," replied the captain, keeping her face haughty. "I can understand the language better than I can speak it. What should I say?"

"Anything you like; you're doing fine. Say something to me, and look as condescending as possible."

"Very well," she said, complying, "convey my compliments and tell them they can all go stick their noses in their ears and blow their brains out."

"Thank you," said Newhouse, bowing low. "I'll tell them, but it may lose something in translation."

He turned to the officer and reverted to Oassi. "Her Supremacy understands your lack of proper transportation perfectly, and she will convey her apologies to the Shanni for this unexpected visit. Her Supremacy realizes that you are not at all to blame for not providing a sedan chair suitable for her rank, and she has therefore graciously condescended to wait until a chair of suitable dignity is provided for the remainder of the way."

"Her Supremacy is most gracious," said the diminutive officer, gazing up at the tower-

ing captain in awe. "There will be as little delay as possible."

She turned and barked orders at a squad of husky males standing nearby, and they turned and trotted off at high speed. It was nearly fifteen minutes before they returned, during which time the Earthmen and the Oassi tried to outdo each other in displaying nothing but stolid patience.

The "chair of suitable dignity" was quite something. It was painted a rust red and decorated with gold leaf and polished but uncut gems. It took a dozen of the little aliens, six on either side, to hoist the thing off the ground and carry it after Captain Smith had climbed in. She was obviously a little cramped in a conveyance built for someone two-thirds her size, but she bore it with dignified hauteur. Ksitka, looking very superior, trotted along beside the sedan chair; he was big for a Dynakian, standing a good three inches taller than the city-dwellers.

Newhouse and Pemberton had climbed into the less brightly decorated chairs that they'd provided, and were carried along behind the captain as the procession wound its

way through the streets of the city toward the citadel.

A runner had been sent on ahead to warn the Shanni that an unexpected guest was coming, and she and her rather diminutive consort were on the top step of the citadel, flanked by another batch of guardsmen when the guests arrived. Her daughter, the Shannil, and her consort, Boccaccio di Vino, were nowhere to be seen.

That's partial confirmation, at least, Newhouse thought wryly. The jungle tribesmen who had occasion to trade in the city had brought word back that the Shannil feared that her new husband might take it in his head to return to his own people—a crime which, like suicide, might not be punishable when successful, but to try and fail was a criminal offense in Oassi. Evidently the citadel guards were making sure that lover-boy didn't go over the hill.

Not that he'd ever been allowed much freedom. The royal family had kept a wary eye on him ever since the wedding; the old Shanni seemed to have a hunch that di Vino hadn't realized he was a bridegroom until it was too late, and she had seemed to sense right away that he was

not too keen on the idea of staying.

As arranged, it was Sergeant Pemberton who performed all the amenities and introductions between Her Supremacy, the Captain, and Her Splendor, the Shanni. In the first place, his Oassish was better, and, in the second, Newhouse wanted to observe the expressions on the faces of the Shanni and the Shann.

The Shann was an elderly male who looked—naturally—rather henpecked. He didn't say much; he just stood there and smiled half-heartedly as the Shanni chatted in friendly fashion with her "sister," Captain Virginia Smith, through the fluent interpretation of Pemberton. They might have been any ruling family of Earth welcoming another chief executive.

Pemberton, of course, was giving the impression that Captain Smith was the ruler of the alien fortress that was situated a hundred miles away, on the banks of the Ngang River. The people of Oassi hadn't been informed of the true origin of the Earthmen, nor would they be; as far as Oassi was concerned, they came from a "far land," and knew a little something about magic, but they weren't dangerous, they just had to be

watched, like any other non-Oassi group. And, after all, Oassi had a much larger army and the magicians and priests of Oassi had magic, too, didn't they? *Sure* they did.

And Earth, the capital of the United Commonwealth of Planets, not only liked the way things stood, but demanded that they be kept that way. Any civilization which appeared to be capable of lifting itself by its own bootstraps should do so; at this stage of the game, Man should not interfere. Of course, their very presence on the planet had already, changed, somewhat, the course of Oassi's history, but that couldn't be helped; nothing can be observed without affecting it.

The Shanni of Oassi appeared to be pleasantly impressed with Captain Smith, just as Newhouse had figured. She had certainly not been impressed by human males, which was perfectly understandable. What would Haroun al Rashid have said if some other country had sent a delegation of women to Baghdad?

Oh, the Shanni had been perfectly happy to agree to a treaty to furnish *gakgak* milk for good, honest gold (well, maybe not *too* honest; it was the product of an atomic con-

verter), but that was just business. Gold is fine stuff, even if a lowly male brings it.

But when it came to statesmanship, that was a different matter. The Shanni seemed obviously more at home with Captain Smith, even if the conversation did have to be filtered through Sergeant Pemberton.

After a minute or two, the Shanni turned to a nearby officer and gave her a slight nod. The whole guard unit wheeled about in precision array and everyone marched into the citadel: a half dozen guards in the lead, followed by the Shanni and Shann, and Captain Smith; Pemberton and Newhouse followed them, and behind the two officers came the rest of the guardsmen. And last, but foremost, came the carriers bearing the precious bundles of Earth-type food.

The banquet that night was a sumptuous, but somewhat lopsided affair, Newhouse thought. The Oassi stuffed themselves like pigs, and the four Earth people ate nothing. The Shanni already understood that her guests, for some mysterious reason, could not partake of Oassi food.

Boccaccio di Vino and his wife, the Shannil, had made

their appearance, and di Vino, still a diplomat, put on an excellent face, but there was worry in his eyes.

Newhouse wanted to pump some information out of him, but he didn't dare address him in English, for fear that the Shanni might suspect a plot was being fomented at her banquet table, right under her nose. But that was just the reason why he had told Captain Smith not even to speak the few words of Oassish that she did know.

He smiled at her and said: "Captain, I'm going to be talking to our friend, the bridegroom, but pretend I'm addressing you. I'm not going to mention your name," he went on, knowing that di Vino was listening, "because they'd recognize the words. Captain, say something in a questioning tone. Something fairly long."

"Fine," she said, "because I do have a question to ask. How long do you think we'll have to be here before we can get our diplomat out?"

"I don't know. That's why I want to ask some questions." Then he turned to the Shanni and smiled. "Her Superemacy wishes to inquire as to the health of the royal family, if that is not forbidden by rules

of etiquette." He knew perfectly well that it wasn't.

"Not at all," said the Shanni, in her rather high, brittle voice. "Our family is quite well. All sound in body and mind. Although—" A small smile came to her face, and something shone in her eyes. "—we await fertile eggs."

"I see." He turned to Captain Smith, but his words were obviously meant for di Vino. "Don't speak to Smith until I've spoken to you in Oassish. What I want to know is, how many unfertile clutches of eggs has your wife produced so far, and how long is the production cycle?"

Captain Smith nodded. "Tell me, what am I supposed to do?"

"Just look at the Shanni and smile, then smile *very* benignly on the Shanni."

While that was going on, Newhouse turned pleasantly to di Vino. "And how are you and your wife, Your Eminence?"

"Quite well, thank you," said di Vino suavely. "We expect to have a family before long, you know."

"Indeed? I hope your attempts will be successful."

"We all do," said the Shanni in a smooth voice. Looking at her, Newhouse could see why, in spite of her alienness,

she had been the cause of di Vino's troubles.

There was a momentary silence around the room.

Then di Vino looked at Smith and said casually: "I don't know who you are, Lieutenant, but if you can get me out of this mess, you can have my right arm. To answer your question, my—uh—wife produces an egg every sixty-five days or thereabouts. The fertilization has to take place about twenty days before the cycle is completed. Since I've been here, she's produced two. If the next one isn't fertile, I'll end up in the family mausoleum, accompanied by much lamentation." He paused and smiled at Captain Smith expectantly.

Smith smiled back. "I have a question, if you two don't mind. If that's the case, it seems to me that these people could have a child every sixty-five days. They'd have overrun the planet centuries ago."

"No," di Vino said. "Even the cycles have cycles—or epicycles, maybe. The females produce three or four, stop for about four years before another cycle comes on. I just happened to catch this girl at the wrong time; otherwise, I wouldn't be married now."

"I see," said the captain. She smiled pleasantly.

Before di Vino could say anything in answer, the Shanni's voice cut in—rather sharply, Newhouse thought. "Are you a relative of the Kapteen, my dear?" she asked di Vino.

"No, Your Splendor," said di Vino.

"Well, in Oassi, well-bred princes don't speak to visiting ladies to whom they are not related. And remember, my dear, you're an Oassi now."

"I beg forgiveness, your Splendor," di Vino said humbly.

That put somewhat of a chill on the whole dinner party. Conversation from that point on was utterly innocuous and utterly boring.

Newhouse only got one more small piece of information. The Shanni's consort, the Shann, had made a remark about having "produced his three eggs," and further conversation elicited the information that each Shanni or Shannil was supposed to have three children by her consort. Newhouse marked it down in his mental files for later use when he formed a plan.

When the meal was finally finished, the visitors were taken to their quarters in a wing of the citadel reserved for visitors, well away from

the wing reserved for the Shanni and Shann.

The citadel itself was built strongly, with the thick walls of a fortress, and the heavy silverwood doors—white as limed oak and hard as teak—were capable of being barred from either side. Although the Earthmen were not locked in, there was an "honor" guard in the hall outside, and Newhouse had no doubt that any idea he might have of roaming about the citadel would be politely but firmly vetoed.

The apartment that had been assigned to them was hardly comfortable by modern Terrestrial standards, though a medieval English baron would probably have been cozy enough.

"Looks like a jail, sir," said Sergeant Pemberton as he surveyed the room.

"It is," said Newhouse. "I'm afraid that freedom of the grounds isn't on our agenda." He walked over to the door that connected his and the sergeant's room with the one next to it.

"Come in, Lieutenant," said Virginia Smith.

Newhouse pushed open the heavy door. "I'm going to take a flit about the citadel, Captain," he said. "Would you and the sergeant whip up

something to eat? I shouldn't be gone long."

"All right. But watch yourself. My Supremacy might be a little hard put to explain what you were doing if you got caught."

"Don't worry; I'm supposed to get an Earthman out of a jam, not get another one in. You want to give me that harness?"

"Sure. Close the door and give me two minutes."

Newhouse did as he'd been asked. Captain Smith had been wearing an antigrav harness under her robes. Since none of the three was obviously carrying a sword, axe, or spear, it had been assumed that they were unarmed, except, perhaps for a small dagger or the like, which was perfectly permissible. But the Oassi had no idea what the term "minaturization" meant. Newhouse, Pemberton, and Smith were all armed to the teeth.

Even so, an antigravity unit required extra clothing to cover it; the uniforms of Pemberton and Newhouse were a little too close-fitting to hide it completely.

Captain Smith was better than her word. Less than two minutes later, she opened the door and handed Newhouse the harness. The lieutenant

put it on and walked over to the narrow, slitlike window that looked out on the courtyard.

Dynak was a moonless planet, and, at this time of year, the stars that might have shone in the night sky were obscured by the black blanket of a nearby dark nebula, a great dustcloud that shrouded most of the sky.

Except for the flickering torches in the courtyard below and the glow of candlelight from the windows of the citadel, the walls of the citadel were in utter darkness. Certainly the guards forty feet below couldn't see a man crawling along the walls, and they probably wouldn't believe their eyes if they did.

Newhouse then adjusted the power unit to a point where he only weighed a few ounces and lifted his feet off the floor, doubling his knees up against his abdomen. Since his mass remained the same, he drifted downwards very slowly under the slight pull of attenuated gravity.

"You're not completely neutralized," Captain Smith then pointed out.

"I don't want to be," Newhouse said. "I've got to have a little weight so that I can get a fingertip purchase on that rough wall. Otherwise, I'm

likely to push myself away from it, and I don't want to use the air jet unless I have to." He landed lightly on his heels and then stood up slowly, so as not to push himself off the floor again. He slid, rather than walked, back to the window. "Bye, kiddies," he said. "Save me a sandwich." And he eased himself out the window.

He was gone longer than he had thought he would be. It took him nearly an hour to find which of the windows in the royal wing opened into Boccacio di Vino's bedroom, moving himself carefully across the stone wall of the citadel, avoiding windows, staying out of sight of the patrols that walked the upper parapets, and keeping his ears open for the distinctive sound of the Earthman's voice. He even found time to curse the nomadic tribes that roamed the grass plains to the south because their very existence kept the city of Oassi in a perpetual state of preparedness against raids, which meant that there were lookouts and guards all over the place and he had to be extra cautious.

At each window, he had to skirt around it, pause and listen, then carefully ease a tiny spy-eye out to take a look

inside, until he found di Vino's quarters.

When he finally found them, he had to wait another ten minutes while di Vino and the young Shannil concluded a rather strained conversation. When the Shannil walked off toward her own room, Newhouse peeked his head around the edge of the window and said: "Hsst! Di Vino!"

The young diplomat jerked his head around quickly. When he saw who it was, he ran quickly to the window. "What is it?" he asked. "Are we getting out of here?"

"Not just yet. I'm getting you out of here all nice and legal-like, if I can. We won't use force except as the last resort." He didn't add that such a "very last resort" might be too late for di Vino.

"But—how?"

"Never mind that now; I've got to get some information. It's vitally necessary. I tried to get it at the banquet, but the Shanni shut you up."

"Sure. Anything you want."

"Well, I know all about the cyclic pattern of Dynakian reproduction, but I need *specific* information. Times and dates, right down to the minute, if possible."

"That's easy," di Vino said wryly. "The Shanni is keeping

pretty accurate records, and so is Oanella. She knows by now that I don't love her, and she's going to be perfectly happy to get rid of me. She—"

"Never mind that now!" Newhouse snapped in irritation. "The *dates* man! The *dates*!"

Hurriedly, di Vino told him. When he did, Newhouse breathed a sigh of relief. "Good! We've got three days yet!" He fished into his jacket and came out with a small, black cylinder a little larger than a cigarette, with a small stud at one end. "You know how to use a sleep gun?"

Di Vino nodded.

"Good. Take it. Keep it on you at all times. Day after tomorrow when Oanella goes to sleep for the night, use it on her. But, for heavens sake, *wait till she gets to sleep*. Got that?"

"Right. Then what?"

"Then wait for me to show up. That sleep gun's got a signal built into it. As soon as you shoot her, I'll know about it. All you'll have to do is blow out your candles, so that there's no light coming from your room. Got that?"

"I've got it. But—"

There were footsteps outside the door. "So long," Newhouse whispered. "Don't slip up. He moved away from the

window just as the door opened, and he heard the Shannil say: "What's so interesting at the window, dear? Getting homesick?" There was more than a trace of sarcasm in her voice.

Newhouse made his way back to his own quarters as fast as he could.

"Hope I didn't worry anyone," he said as he popped into the window.

"Nope," said Pemberton. "We figured if you'd been caught there would have been an uproar and we'd have heard about it. Come in and have a sandwich. And some coffee."

"In a minute," said Newhouse. I've got some radioing to do."

"The call box is on the table," said Captain Virginia Smith.

The next day was largely devoted to discussion between Her Supremacy, the Captain, and Her Splendor, the Shanni, on the increased production of *gakgak* milk. The Shanni, after much careful negotiation, promised that more would be forthcoming.

Newhouse, personally, had a hunch that the Shanni was trying to negotiate a treaty with the southern nomads for *gakgak* milk, with the intent

of selling it to the Earthmen at a profit—which was all right with everyone, if she could swing it.

The third day was much like the second, but this time, Newhouse began to inject something new into the discussions — presumably suggestions from Captain Smith.

"Would it be possible, Your Splendor, to have the young Shannil's consort return home for a space of — say, ten days?"

A wary look came into the old woman's eyes, but the smile never left her face. "The Shannexa's home is Oassi," she said smoothly.

"True, true. We apologize for the error in terminology. Let us say, rather, that we would like to have him visit his previous home."

The Shanni looked almost apologetic. "It would be my pleasure to allow the dear child to revisit his old home," she said, "but, alas, it cannot be."

"Indeed?"

"I fear not. The ancient laws of Oassi are very strict on that point, and I would not dare to violate them. Even the Shanni is not all-powerful. My people would disown me if I violated so powerful a taboo."

"Just what is this — ah — law, Your Splendor?"

"A very ancient one, Your Supremacy. No royal consort may leave his wife until he produces his three eggs. Three offspring, in other words, of which at least one must be a girl."

"Ah, well, of course, we would hesitate to ask you to violate so powerful a law. We will be content to wait. But you will permit the visit at that time?"

The Shanni smiled thinly. "I give you my solemn vow that he will be permitted to leave when — and if — that time arrives."

Well, well, well, Newhouse thought to himself, the old dame suspects already that her daughter can never have children by di Vino. She's out after his hide. And it's getting more obvious by the minute.

"And how long do you estimate that to be, Your Splendor?"

The Shanni's eyes became veiled. "You know our law. But, even if the first egg is produced within the period, I'm afraid it would be another four years before the next is produced. It would be four years at the minimum before he could leave."

"Very well. So be it." The subject was dismissed as though it were a light thing, but Newhouse already had

what he wanted. Every Oassi noble in the room had heard the Shanni make a solemn vow.

That night, Newhouse sat by his detector, waiting for it to give the telltale blink that would come when di Vino fired the sleep gun. When it did come, Newhouse already had his harness on, and he was out the window before the glow had died in the telltale. He scuttled crabwise across the great stone wall of the citadel, but this time he knew exactly where he was going, and he made it in less than ten minutes.

Di Vino was waiting in the darkened window. "Thank heaven!" he whispered. I thought you'd never get here. Now what."

"Where is she?" Newhouse asked.

"Over on the bed."

"Good. Now put a blanket or something over that window so that the guard can't see a light."

When the window was blacked out and a candle had been lit, Newhouse bent over the unconscious female. The sleep gun had done its work well.

"All right, di Vino, help me get this harness on her. We're kidnapping the Shannil."

"Kidnap the—" Di Vino choked and blinked. "But *I'm* the one who's supposed to get out of here."

"I'll explain the whole thing when she's gone. Come on! We haven't much time!"

When the Shannil was securely fixed in the harness, Newhouse turned up the power until her weight was a minus twenty pounds. Then he fastened a length of strong plaston cording to the harness. Then he clamly tossed her out the window. She fell upwards fairly rapidly.

When the cord was taut, Newhouse tied the end of it around the arm of a heavy silverwood chair. "That's that," he said. "Now all we have to do is wait."

Boccaccio di Vino said: "Wait? For *what*? What's going on?"

"Your lady-love is about two hundred feet over the citadel, with a signalling gadget on her. There's been an aircar hovering on its anti-gravs up there for the last two hours. When they pick up the signal, they'll pick up the girl. Simple, isn't it?"

"But what are they going to do?"

Newhouse grinned. "I think I'll let you suffer a while longer. Teach you to keep away from strange females."

"I've already learned that," di Vino said morosely.

"Then this ought to drive it home, pal. Just sit down and relax; we've got several hours to kill. Got a drink?"

"Some Scotch," said di Vino in a glum tone. "And a deck of cards, if we have to kill time. Play cribbage?"

"Yup. Drag 'em out."

The cord moved a little, and Newhouse knew they were taking the Shannil out of the harness, which would be left there until they came back.

"That's that for a while," he said. "Get the bottle out."

By the time the rope was jiggled once more, Lieutenant Newhouse had taken a week's wages from di Vino at cribbage, to be payable when the diplomat returned to Dynak Base. Newhouse blew out the candle, went over and pushed the blanket aside, and took a cautious look up. He couldn't see a thing, but a second tug on the rope told him that all was well. He began hauling down on the line. The girl came easily, since the men in the aircar had reduced her negative weight to zero, and then added a couple of ounces of positive weight.

When she appeared at the window, the two men pulled her in, and Newhouse took off

the antigravity harness and began putting it on himself. "Just let her sleep," he told di Vino. "She won't know a thing in the morning."

Di Vino narrowed his eyes. "What did they do to her? If—"

"If, nothing," Newhouse snapped. "We got you out of a jam. We hope. Now just relax and take it easy. See you in a while." He climbed out the window again. He grinned to himself as he went crabwise across the face of the wall. Di Vino thought he knew what had happened, and di Vino was dead wrong. He couldn't have been further off base.

The Captain and her entourage departed the next morning amid a gush of good wishes and a show of pageantry, with an invitation to return at a later date. They got into the cars and went back into the jungle, headed for Dynak Base. Newhouse reported to Colonel Hastings and told him nothing except that he had made a "preliminary survey" of the situation at Oassi. If his plan didn't work, Newhouse didn't want Hastings looking smug.

Then Lieutenant Newhouse just sat around, looking as though he were thinking hard, while one day after another

trudged its weary way into eternity.

One fine day, he went with the food car again, and when he returned, he had Boccaccio di Vino with him.

"I still don't see what made them let you go, di Vino," the colonel said with puzzled anger.

"Frankly, I'm not sure what happened, myself," Boccaccio admitted. He turned toward Newhouse, and there was anger in his eyes. "But I think Lieutenant Newhouse can explain."

Newhouse said: "What's the matter, di Vino? You still in love with that girl?"

"Well—" Di Vino paused, and an odd look came into his eyes. "Well I guess I am—in a way. Not that I'd go back; I'm not the right man for her at all. But—well—she was a good kid. And—" The anger came back. "—and what you had done to her would have gotten you hanged if you'd done it back on Earth."

Bruce MacAuliffe, di Vino's immediate superior, was also standing beside Colonel Hastings' desk. "What did he do di Vino?"

"He got Oanella pregnant!" di Vino said. "Or, well, *he* didn't. But he had someone else do it. And while she was un-

conscious, too! Probably got one of the local savages to—"

"I did no such thing," Newhouse interrupted mildly. "I—"

"Now, just a minute," Colonel Hastings interrupted. "You said that she got pregnant, di Vino. You mean that she laid a fertile egg?"

"Yes. I mean, well, no, not exactly. She produced *four* fertile eggs. Which is pretty darned unusual. Her mother and father got all excited. The Shanni was all a dither, and her consort was getting so nervous he went into a fit of the shakes. You should have seen that old gal running around like a scalded cat. And you should have been there when the fit hit the Shann. It's the first time any Oassi female has ever produced four fertile eggs at once." He looked at Newhouse again. "Just what did you do?"

"Yes," said Colonel Hastings heavily. "I think we all deserve an explanation."

"The biotechnicians would be able to tell you better than I, sir," Newhouse said. "They're writing up a report on it. It's a simple process, in effect, but a very delicate one."

"We simply had to wait until the single ovum the Shannil

was carrying had arrived at the proper stage of development—something the biotechs had found out in checking on the local savages. They removed the unfertilized ovum and put it through two different processes. First, they self-fertilized it. When an ovum is formed by splitting of the parent cell, the egg itself retains half the chromosomes, while the other half are thrown off in what is called a polar body. The boys simply used the polar body to fertilize the egg. Then they waited until the fertile ovum divided the first time and separated the cells; when the second division occurred, the cells were separated again, giving them four. These were replaced, and in due time, the Shannil produced four fully developed eggs. And they'll all hatch females; it's possible to tell by the shape of the rubbery shell whether an egg will be a male or female, so the Shanni was happy as a lark. The girls, of course, will be exact genetic duplicates of their mother—who is also their father, although she doesn't know it. Still—" He grinned. "—there's an old saying: 'If you want a job done right, do it yourself.'"

THE END

*When she was good she was very, very
good. But when she was bad . . .*

WAS SHE HORRID?

By DAVID R. BUNCH

I PICKED her up on my early warning line when she was still a long way out—just a speck on the last of my plastic hills where I watched for the Enemies. I tracked her all the way in, all the long way in as she came, little-girl wanderingly, something cradled in her baby arms. For a moment my mind reeled back and I thought, "It's just Little Sister come carrying the Littlest Angel up to my door." Then my thoughts snapped up to NOW as she rattled the gate, and I flicked the weapons button till all of the launchers were directed at my Outer Wall.

"The password! Quickly!" I shouted, and I really hoped she could give the right one. Otherwise I would have to go with the launchers. And it

might not be one of the ground-level creeping missiles I had heard Witch had developed in the great laboratories of her plastic valley. It possibly wasn't a camouflaged walking doll-bomb designed to blow me to all skies. It might be really Little Sister truly having forgotten the secret password.

"Morning - glory - fit - and - fancy," she lisped, sharp as a little tack, and her big-big eyes I noticed were real, and there was love, I thought, sparkling through. It was a little girl!

"Advance to Gate 10 and be recognized," I said, relieved, flicking the eleventh, outer gate open. She came on through the walls as I thumbed the gates back. "Stand by for decontamina-

tion," I directed, speaking all along over the Big Address, when she stood before the last gate but two, fatty-round in her play spacesuit. She was jigging little-girl joyfully; she was going to see her daddy. But I had to watch. It might be tricks and booby traps. I directed all my inspectors and decontaminators on her as I let her through the last gate but one, tracking her closely with my weapons. When she stood before the last gate I asked her, "Do you have a pass to be here? Did Witch write you out a paper?"

"I slipped off from Witch," she said and giggled. That pleased me. Witch was the wife, living over a dozen plastic hills from me, with, it had been reported from time to time, more than a dozen different plastic men. But it wasn't just for Witch that I had all the launchers and the Seeing Wall. Witch was only part of my troubles, the very most minor part almost now, things being what they are in the world; she lived in her plastic valley with her men and we saw each other infrequently indeed. Sometimes at Xmas we would exchange a frozen greeting — "Merry Xmas over there!"—over our multiviewers; sometimes at Halloween I would send old

broomsticks as a token of my love. And once, on a very recent Easter—I could never explain it—we found ourselves both outside our walls peering toward each other's strongholds just as the pink sun shot over the ice-like plastic hills. When I looked directly into her glass with my glass and saw the weird blue ball that was her newest eye I aged ten years just thinking, thinking of all the icy people-hatred in the world. And so who could wonder that the walls out there have the pillboxes eight feet thick and the steel men waiting? It is not odd that I fear the creeping missiles, the walking doll-bombs and the White Witch rocket's flash, realizing that all I have to pit against them is constant vigilance. But she had my children—little boy and little girl. He has gone over to the side of the plastic men now and works mostly with his space tubes . . . and hardly ever sees his daddy. He's satisfied to be away from him.

But as I said, Witch wasn't the only threat now. I didn't regard her as even the major threat now. She was a gadfly. The implacable Enemies were somewhere over farther hills, and then there was Time . . . Time trying to get through to

my flesh strips before I could get through to the Ultimate.

"Hello, Little Sister." The decontaminators had given her a clean bill; the weapons report had indicated that she was clear—RELIABLY as to her person, and a blurred CONDITIONAL was indicated for what she carried. I saw she carried the Littlest Angel so I thought it a reasonable risk—a little girl and her dolly. I let them through. And now she stood before me, a tiny cherub of three, all flesh and bone and blood, her own, as yet, except her teeth, which were steel. And that was as far as the Rebuilders of Moderan had replaced her as yet, in deference to her years. By the age of twelve, if she lived, she would have all metal limbs, and perhaps, by that time, some of her organs would be plated. (I'm ninety-two and one-half percent metal alloys myself, designed to last forever!) "How are you, Little Sister?"

She lisped, jiggling in glee, "I came to live with you, Daddy. I ran away from Witch. You need love!"

"Oh no!" I was taken aback and thoroughly stunned. I rose from my hip snuggie chair and stood trembling, all my flesh strips flooding cold

sweat. All my metal parts, where they had rebuilt me, clanged and zinged. A little girl living with me! What would it do to my thinking? My work? Wouldn't she try to follow me into the Atmosphere Room of the Primitive where the walls were stone and bright blood colored . . . ? Wouldn't she want to know how it was in the White Room of the Innocents when the two tons-heavy black metal balls moved on the chains . . . ? Wouldn't she wish to be included, embarrassingly, as help when I went to feed my flesh strips the complicated fluids of the introven? And what if, some capricious day, I not knowing, she wandered alone into the horrors of the Tube of the Million Mirrors where amid awesome flashing desolation I search for my true reflection?

"Little Sister," I cried, and I held on to all the things I could reach, and I based my knees against two weapons men who stood by me, so that I hardly clanked and zinged at all now, "do you know, Little Sister, what I could do with you with but the press of a finger? Do you know that this is an armed place as well as an armored place, Little Sister? Do you realize that if you were to hold me, or tie me up,

I could still throw a sign to one of my automatic weapons men and he would do the right thing to get you? And in the ultimate contingency, Little Sister, if all seemed otherwise at length but really lost, I could say a certain phrase at any one of all these tubes in the ceiling, all these tubes in the sides or the floor, and that would start a chain reaction in a stronghold I have hidden in a mountain far away from these walls. And all of this would blow up! You wouldn't win, you see, even then!" I was trembling against the weapons men who stood nearby; for all I tried not to, my hands made a tinkling sound where I held to two steel posts. And the little monster just stood there, a tiny girl in a play spacesuit laughing up at me, two blue eyes of ridicule it seemed, and she was still holding what I could see was the Littlest Angel. "You wouldn't win, Little Sister!" Sweat from my flesh strips was falling down to the floor.

"You wouldn't want me?"

"I couldn't have you. Don't try to force me. It would interfere with my deep thinking. I would be entirely a different person with you about. I couldn't search through to the Ultimate!" I found I was almost screaming.

"I'll go then. I thought you needed love."

"Love !!! No, a visit's fine. Ten minutes or so, since you're an immediate member of the family, if you didn't bring anything to hurt me. But love—well, it would be a bother — so unrealistic. And I might forget to watch for the Enemies."

"I'll go now!" Her lower lip pouting out indicated that she thought her feelings had been hurt. Or else she was acting. With little girls it's hard to say.

"I'm glad you could come," I said. I fear I said it a trifle stiffly. I never could unbend at such times. But since I could see the end of the visit was at hand I found I wasn't clanking anymore. "Now, if you must go—" I said. "Witch will probably be worried, you know," I said.

She left then, out through all the gates, with the weapons tracking her. And I noticed that she kept looking back over her shoulder, but there weren't any tears in her eyes, and I wondered vaguely why her steel teeth were bared in what seemed to me a little girl's devilish grin. Then I saw on the floor where she had left the Littlest Angel, and I stooped to take it and rush it

to her. When I touched the Littlest Angel both my hands blew off up to the shoulders. And the paw of a giant seemed to lift me and hurl me through ten rooms. Mined! But I wasn't hurt badly. I recovered in time to see Little Sister trudging up the last of my plastic hills. When she turned and waved just at the top of the last rise, just windmilled a fat tubular arm of a play spacesuit in my direction before she turned down into the Valley of the Witch, I suppose I should have blasted her with the launchers. For I suppose she was meaning to be waving a last greeting at the place where she thought her daddy was dead. But I didn't have my arms fixed back yet to press the buttons, and who could say that Little Sister

was actually to blame for the mining of the Littlest Angel?

Perhaps it was mostly Witch and that was why the loud bands played and a flurry of flags and victory flares broke out on the air over her valley while I lay on the black stumps of my shoulders, gasping.

And besides, I face other Enemies, bad implacable Enemies whipping their wings through the milky air, watching me from a brown distance. They sharpen horns and claws and teeth full of danger and they shape reptilian tails for the whirring pounce that will end ME! Oh yes! Tomorrow I must stand even closer to my launchers and seek a way to redouble my vigilance on the hills.

THE END

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According to you...

Dear Editor:

The September issue would have marked a momentous occasion. Exactly one year before I began buying *Fantastic* as a steady reader. But I suppose that we haggard old *Weird Tales* veterans must fall to defeat at the hands of science fiction. When, in late 1954, *W.T.* made its last offering to its readers, we sighed and knew that the end of an era had come. We dogged the newsstands eagerly awaiting the appearance of another fantasy-fiction periodical, but none worthwhile came.

After much consideration I purchased the October 1958 issue. It was a joy to behold. It was filled with planning and readers' enthusiasm. As time wore on, and editors changed, I saw great prospects in *Fantastic*. The editors took a poll in which weird-horror tales placed far ahead of all other types of other fiction. Readers, myself included, sang shouts of praise. The covers were terrific, the material improving . . . *Weird Tales* reincarnated. But alack and alas, the September issue was a dismay, to me. I took one look at the logo and knew the worst had happened: *Fantastic Science Fiction Stories*. I could not believe my bloodshot eyes. I blinked and read it again. But the great green science fiction monster jumped out before my horrified gaze.

And so the haggard old *Weird Tales* veteran crawls back to his moldy stack of the "bygone greats" and reminisces of better days when Lovecraft, Quinn and Derleth ground out the ancient classics.

Good-bye, *Fantastic*.

R. D. Miller

5753 31st N.E.

Seattle 5, Washington

• *You want a magazine with 90% bad fantasy? Or one with*

50% first-class fantasy and 50% first-class s-f? Ah, well, parting is always sweet sorrow. Good-bye, R. D. Miller.

Dear Editor:

I have read with interest, as *Fantastic* has improved its format over the past two years. The greatest improvement, in my mind, of course has been the transition from s-f to fantasy.

I would like to suggest your readers make the comparison test (as I have) by reading (for example) a Rog Phillips or Robert Bloch story of, say, vintage 1950, then one written in 1959. Is it my imagination, or, are the old stories more capable of holding the reader's interest than the ones being ground out today?

Dale E. Randles, Jr.
650 Gretchen Road
Chula Vista, California

• *What say you, fans? Were the old stories better? Or is it just nostalgia leading us astray?*

Dear Editor:

I see you have changed your title to *Fantastic Science Fiction Stories*. Does this mean no more of the weird and macabre?

I don't like to be too heavy on the criticism, for I know what a task editing must be, especially since peoples' tastes vary so greatly. But it is sad indeed to find out that the writers of that kind of story are just not writing them anymore. (Which I imagine is the case.) Since the demand for them is so great, it is a shame.

I am glad to see that Fritz Leiber is starring in the November issue. He is fabulous. Have you ever read his "Space-Time for Springers"? If you haven't, please try to do so. It is the most delightful fantasy I think I have ever read. He is terrific on the horror story—maybe he will contribute some to *Fantastic*.

Our favorite story in the September issue was "Toro"—very well written, one of the best shorts I've ever read. "The Blackbird" wasn't too bad, but not quite the usual Sharkey. Neither was "Ship Ahoy" in the October issue. Couldn't see much point to that at all. The idea was all right but it was badly executed.

I guess my trouble is that I have read so much s-f, fantasy and horror through the years that I have become hard to please.

We are still hoping for much more of the macabre and I know that when it is possible, you will "deliver the goods."

Mrs. Elaine Fielder

36 James Rd.

Matboro, Pa.

• *Basically you are correct—there is a shortage of good fantasy. We will print all we can get, but Fantastic will include some science-fiction. Leiber (whose "Space-Time for Springers" we have read and enjoyed many times) has a powerful novel in the January issue of Amazing. It will interest you. Keep on being hard to please. That's the kind of readers we like—they keep us on our editorial toes.*

Dear Editor:

In most parts the September issue was terrific. However, Runyon's "Solution Tomorrow" was ghastly. Why you didn't headline A. Bertram Chandler's "Female of the Species" is beyond me. The Sharkey story was good, but not his best so far. "The Toy" was a masterpiece.

How about a yarn dealing with voodoo?

Jeff Patton

824 Austin Avenue

Park Ridge, Ill.

• *Voodoo? Did you hear the one about the Haitian who said, "Who was that girl I saw you with last night?" "That was no girl," replied the Voodoo priest, "that was my mamalei."*

Dear Editor:

The September issue of *Fantastic* is fantastic! I believe it is one of the best issues I've seen since I've been reading this magazine. Let's have more by Jess Shelton. His "Maidens For the Cenote" was great and Jack Sharkey's "The Blackbird" is his best so far. Those two along with Phyllis Gotlieb's "A Grain of Manhood" are three of the best stories I have read all year. Henry Slesar's "Toy" was fair and the novelet by Runyon was okay. Only "Toro" really failed to hold my interest.

When is someone going to edit an anthology of stories from *Amazing* and *Fantastic*? Other magazines have their stories appearing regularly in anthologies but never your two fine publications. *Fantastic* alone has published enough top-notch s-f to be anthologized right now. The three mentioned in this letter plus "Those Winslow Girls," "The Shakespeare Manuscript," "Blurble," "Cedric," "The Hungry Eye," "The Abnormals," "A Touch of Sun," "40-26-38," and "The Last Plea" to name a few. Derleth, Wollheim, Conklin, Margulies, Davenport, wake up! You are skipping the best!

Billy Joe Plott
P.O. Box 654
Opelika, Alabama

- *Our office is always open to the stalk-eyed anthologist.*

Dear Editor:

While most of the themes of science fantasy have been heavily exploited, it is reassuring to see that refreshing variations of those themes are still appearing in *Fantastic*. Strangely enough, new authors are coming up with many of the better stories. Jack Sharkey has, in a very short time, and with half a dozen or so stories, made a well-deserved "name" for himself. Once (or, rather, twice) he has come through with two types of stories, both of them handled with skill. I refer to "Let X Equal Alligator" (Aug.) and "The Blackbird" (Sept.) the latter a welcome fantasy in a time when fantasy seems on the decline.

It has become apparent that the modern trend in science fiction is toward the mind-over-matter evolution in homo sapiens, and Mr. Runyon does wonders with the same theme in "Solution Tomorrow."

This is good fare you've been dishing out of late. Continue this well balanced diet of good science fiction *and* fantasy and you should have no difficulty making many new friends—and retaining the loyalty of us "old-timers."

Bobby Gene Warner
745 Eldridge St.
Orlando, Florida

- *Well, not much difficulty, anyway.*

Dear Editor:

I have enjoyed science fiction for some time, now, but it wasn't until your June '59 issue came out that I read a digest such as yours. Ever since that time, I have bought every issue that has come out. In fact, I enjoyed your magazine so much that I went out and bought several back issues. It is from these back issues that the following inquiries are derived.

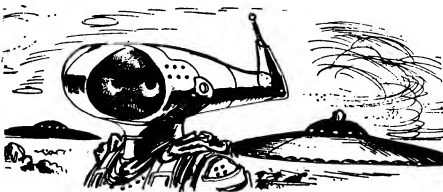
In your July '55 issue you published a very absorbing, terrifying story by Mark Guthrie, "These Bones For Hire," and you also quoted Mr. Guthrie. He said that that story might be his one and only sale, and I would like to know if this statement is true up to today.

Also, I would like to know what happened to Mr. Ivar Jorgensen. The stories that I have read by him were excellent.

Finally, I would like to compliment Mr. Murray Leinster on his great, enthralling, taut and suspenseful story, "Long Ago, Far Away." His theories on time travel, and the existence of the Fifth Planet, are the best and most plausible I have ever run across in science fiction.

Spencer Carlsen
No. Hollywood, Calif.

• *Both of those writers were actually octopods from Boötes, who have since lost their writing—specialized tentacles. Clear? Ok?*





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